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This dissertation analyzes critical utopian discourse in nine American novelists, making the claim that in American literature, at least, we have of necessity entered a postethnic stage of the communal imagination. Beginning with theories of utopia offered by Mannheim, Ricœur, Bloch, Moylan, and Jameson, this study claims, in its introduction, that a thoroughgoing critical utopia must rethink whose ideals count as the ideal toward which we all should work. Collectively raised by Werner Sollors, David Hollinger, Giles Gunn, and Caroline Rody, the problems of identity and solidarity call our attention to the urgency of interethnic or, differently, postethnic cooperation. Some principles for such cooperation are here outlined with the help of Elaine Scarry, Jean-Luc Nancy, Judith Butler, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. The three main parts of this study are organized along a temporal axis. Part one traces the critical reimagining of the past in novels by Tony Morrison, Philip Roth, and Leslie Marmon Silko; part two charts imaginative “present” cartography in novels by Michael Chabon, Richard Powers, and Gerald Vizenor; part three turns to future-writing and the prophetic voice in novels by Octavia Butler, Kurt Vonnegut, and Ursula K. Le Guin. Throughout, it is argued that, due to contemporary socio-demographic and ecological dynamics, we can no longer productively imagine our ideal worlds in the interests of only one, particular community. The afterword concludes postethnic utopias urge a recursive, compassionate, and critical imagination that helps human beings tend to everyday and long-term tasks “ecosocially” as members of a broadly inclusive community.

UTOPIAN DISCOURSE: IDENTITY, ETHNICITY, AND COMMUNITY  
IN POST-COLD WAR AMERICAN NARRATIVE

by

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## FOREWORD / REFOUNDING UTOPIA AFTER IDENTITY

American literature continues to evolve in multiethnic and international directions. Liesl Schillinger points out that “three of the five candidates in the fiction category” of the 2009 National Book Awards “were not born in this country; two of those three live abroad” (2009). It seems clear that we have stopped defining the American novel only by the boundaries of descent and residency. Schillinger attributes the internationalization of American authorship to “the American idea [that] not only translates, it disregards national boundaries.” Sometimes called the American dream, that idea remains one of our most persistent and fraught utopian visions. In American culture, we now see utopianism and utopian literature intersecting with new formulations of multicultural identity. I argue, in the following pages, that the recent utopian imagination in American fiction calls for a postethnic approach. More generally, late twentieth-century changes in the concept of the utopian are entangled with contemporaneous changes in our concepts of identity. As this transformation links to the broader revolutions of globalization, it pushes at the limits of “the American.”<sup>1</sup> Since the late stages and end of the Cold War, we have found it less and less possible to articulate the American dream in monocultural terms.

This transformation of the social imagination in American culture is determined by several often-overlapping factors. In the broadest terms, the condition called postmodernity has altered our understanding of the world we live in; separating this

truism into its constituent parts, we must rethink of both what it means to be “we” and what it means to live in the world. The problems that we face now—ecological disaster, social injustice—require that we confront questions of identity on the one hand and utopia on the other. We can no longer imagine solutions on our own or for ourselves alone, no matter whether the epistemic “we” is defined by race, class, gender, nationality, or sexuality. This claim is not intended as a challenge to the value of self-determination understood as political autonomy and decision-making. What I mean is that, at the present moment, few if any problems belong to or can be solved by any one group of people alone. I want to make clear this is not a moral claim that we ought to be more open to racial diversity or to other kinds of inclusivity, but rather a pragmatic claim that if we want successfully to negotiate emerging issues and crises in our cultures and changes in our environments, we will of necessity have to do so together.

Our identity groups remain, of course, powerful organizing principles in our lives, and problems that confront us are still shaped as they have been by race, gender, class, and nationality. As I explain in detail in my introduction, postethnic utopia is anything but a non-ethnic utopia or a blithe utopian blindness to ethnically configured problems. Although by focusing on novels in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century I limit the scope of my analysis to literature—strategically, as my introduction will show—this should not be mistaken for a sign that ethnically shaped problems are simply a matter of culture, of perception. While we may agree that we are living in new times, ones that I argue have led to a postethnic turn in utopian discourse, we probably will not agree about exactly what this entails. With the election of the first nonwhite president of a majority

white nation, we cannot deny that race (and with it, ethnicity) continues to change. We should not, though, rush to declare a “postracial” America without taking care to qualify what this means. Fred McKissak Jr.’s account of his family’s reaction to the election of Barack Obama is an illustrative case in point. “Moments after CNN declared Barack Obama the next President of the United States,” he writes, “I called my parents. I could tell my father was beaming. Through Obama he could see the future for his grandsons and their peers—a collective sense of inclusion that has eluded the race for so long” (2008). This collective sense of inclusion, and the new future that it opens up, is precisely what is required now. Yet it may be tempered by the fear—which has since been substantiated—that this victory can be leveraged in unwelcome ways. The election clearly marks a new step forward in American society, but while this is a step that comes after past struggles for racial justice, it cannot legitimately be thought that all such struggles are behind us now. “I couldn’t help but think,” McKissak continues, “that now we’re going to hear...the absurd talk about post-racial America. Exactly how can we be in post-racial America when nearly 40 percent of black children under the age of five live at or below the poverty line?” This statistic is one of a litany that McKissak produces to demonstrate his point, with which I thoroughly agree, that even as titanic shifts have taken place at some levels of our culture or society, these have not yet been fully felt as justice all the way through.

Not unlike *postracial*, *postethnic* does not mean—cannot mean—that ethnicity is over as a ground for political action or a category of critique. In fact, turning a blind eye to ethnicity is precisely the problem that postethnic utopianism rejects. McKissak

attributes the “absurd talk” of postracialism to “those who insist that the gap in wealth, income, health care, and education is due to an inherent culture of victimization. If people of color only worked harder, they’d be fine, we are told.” This is, of course, the familiar method of blaming the victim, a tactic well suited to neoliberalism because it allows for an expression of empathy—a recognition of suffering, even of doing work to try and fix what is “wrong” with those who suffer, for example through job training—without challenging the beliefs that supports the social system benefiting the empathetic observer. In my afterword, after having gathered resources from the novels in parts one, two, and three, I will return this question of the balance between taking individual responsibility and mobilizing systemic critique. When appropriate, throughout my project, I try to point out where the postethnic walks the line between an asystemic “blaming the victim” and a historicist “blaming the system.” The historicist position, which invests historical processes and superpersonal entities with mechanistic inevitability, is no more helpful than finding fault in individuals. The latter lets the observer off the hook, and the former mutes any revolutionary call with the idea that no one person could make a difference, even in his or her own life.

Such a need for a theoretical and cultural position from which to speak has been demanded and denied by industrialization and globalization. These technological evolutions under the pressures of late capitalism have altered ideas first formed circa the inception of modernity at the close of the Renaissance. More specifically, this alteration can be attributed to the ways in which space-time compression brings us individually into contact with different ways of life with increasing frequency; these encounters have often



unfolded systemically through subjugation and massacre, with the history of modernity being also the history of colonial empires. In Europe and America, discourses of ethno-racial identity have underwritten colonization, genocide, and slavery, as the Christian empires of Europe forced the conversion of ostensibly less civilized “heathen” peoples to their economic and ethno-religious communities. Whether this alibi for conquest has been framed in religious or evolutionary terms, the history of utopia and modern identity are entangled with each other through the question of what “man” ought to be. In other words, no matter if the dominated groups were demonized as savages, primitives, or heathens (or, often, all several of these), the civilizing mission of Empire or, in the American context, Manifest Destiny, clearly proceeded on utopian terms.

In the twentieth century, in the wake of the horrors of trench warfare and the Holocaust, new social and philosophical movements have questioned of the identity of modern, rational subjectivity. Decolonization has opened up new areas of inquiry into identity critique, such as subaltern studies. On a different front, the dystopian subgenre has taken shape in response to the menaces of the new century, especially fascism. Along the same lines, the critique of the Enlightenment—as advanced, for instance, by Adorno—is also the rejection of Enlightenment-style utopian social engineering. Both European existentialism (in the wake of the world wars) and American pragmatism (arguably initiated with Henry James in the wake of the Civil War) gave us, respectively, anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist means for living in the world around us. And, concurrently, we have increasingly questioned the demands of tribe and culture to name an essential or foundational individual identity. As this study sets out to argue, with

evidence in the works of several late twentieth century American novelists from an array of backgrounds and ostensible allegiances, we can no longer imagine utopia as the ideal world for people “like us.” Increasingly, our imaginary communities have to include, of necessity, people different from ourselves.

My introductory chapters survey the current state of utopian studies alongside identity studies, specifically in the general framework of ethnicity. In utopian studies, arguments about the merits of utopia that marked the early and middle twentieth century have mostly been replaced with an active exploration of the utopian spirit in the time of postmodernity. Theorists have given us several ways to understand the changes in utopia in the twentieth century, including the rise of dystopia (M. Keith Booker [1994]), the countercultural praxis of “critical utopias” (Tom Moylan [1986], Bill Ashcroft [2007]), and the decentering of utopia’s Western location (Ralph Pordzik [2001]). Chapter one of the introduction examines the dialectic of hope and critique that has organized utopian theory. I argue, then, that the change in utopianism we are witnessing can be attributed to and described in terms of contemporaneously emerging new understandings of identity. Chapter two explores two widespread terms for this new understanding: *interethnic* and *postethnic*. I then bring these two fields together in chapter three, in which I ask what a inter-identitarian or postethnic utopia might look like, turning for help to recent philosophies of the literary artifact (Elaine Scarry), community (Jean-Luc Nancy), fragmentation (Dipesh Chakrabarty), and identity (Judith Butler).

The three main parts of this study offer necessarily brief but close readings of novelists who use, to varying extent, the tropes of postethnic utopia. I must be brief in

these readings because of the number of examples—and I wanted to include a sizable amount of material in order to give my reader a sense of the postethnic utopia’s scope. More importantly still, this “excess” is required by the argument I am making, that our utopias are currently best thought of and worked on through the contingent arrangement of many fragments of identity. These novels range from 1985 (Kurt Vonnegut’s *Galapagos*) to 2008 (Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*). In doing so, they span the time period from the late Cold War to the election of Barak Obama. This moment is marked in several interesting ways that are worth a preliminary mention. Many of my critical-theoretical texts, especially the major ones, date from the same period. I believe that both the theorists and the novelists are responding to the same thing: the finalmost stages and end of the USSR, the proclamation of a “New World Order,” with America as the one superpower, and the sudden curbing of that vision in the collapse of the World Trade Centers. I have called this period “post-Cold War” in some places, and the late twentieth century in others. Neither framework is satisfactory, leaving off the earliest or the latest novels in turn. Yet the novels do cohere, I argue, in that they reimagine communities along postethnic lines. That is, they give us a different vision of community, individual identity, and how these are temporally configured. This new, utopian vision is a break, I submit, with the monolithic vision of the Cold War: a world divided in as little as three pieces, with its fate depending on the brinksmanship of two national-imperial superpowers. It is the rejection of this worldview in its Cold War formulation up to the 1980s, its New World Order formulation in the 1990s, and its neo-conservative formulation in the Bush doctrines for the “War on Terror” in the years 2000-2008.

I have arranged these novelists on a chronological axis based on when their novels are set, in the past, present, or future. Surprisingly, this places some of the older novels last and the newer ones first, disrupting the cultural-narrative sequence I have just implied. However, it is the imaginative chronology of the novels, not their dates of publication, that is more salient to understanding how postethnic utopia ruptures time and space. A changing spatiotemporal matrix—sometimes called space-time compression, although it is more than this—transforms our narrative understandings of utopia and identity, requiring new versions of the meaning of our collective past, present, and future. This triptych structure means that I will need a set of subarguments, no less than three, because each of these temporal locations is disrupted in a different way, using different counter-terminology. Although I work with through “local” arguments in each of these sections, my “global” thesis remains that each novelist creates, through the utopian imagination, a postethnic expression of how the world is to be inhabited.

Not all these novels are utopias proper. I deploy *utopia* as the name for a broad discursive field rather than a particular genre. In this, I follow Bill Ashcroft’s strategy of choosing “works deeply imbued with utopian thinking” rather than pure “formal utopias” (2007, 415). Certainly, in the following chapters there are alternative histories (Philip Roth’s *Plot Against America* and Michael Chabon’s *Yiddish Policeman’s Union*), but these are joined by imaginative settings that evoke utopian tropes (Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Garden in the Dunes*) and general interventions in a conventionally utopian discursive sites (Morrison’s *A Mercy*). There are also, especially in part three, science-fiction stories, which I have included broadly without the parsing out of generic differences

between science fiction and utopia that a different argument would require. I have intentionally left out some of the most notable American utopias in favor of those works that deal with utopia and identity as problems for literary work rather than forms to hold particular literary content. So, at first glance, this argument appears to be about utopia and time, but at its heart the concern is with identity and location or, as I will come afterwards to call it in my concluding remarks, ecology. This overabundance of categories and axioms can be organized simply with the statement of a problem: the entanglement of our changing utopias, which are stories about ourselves and the world we live in.

In part one, personal, national, and ethno-cultural histories are reimagined as a malleable unfolding of contingent events rather than as a revelation of inevitable teleological progress. I am not, in this section, concerned with actual history or a historiography that one validates with archival proof or evidence of what “really happened.” This lack of concern does not mean that the imaginary past must always blithely contradict the facticity of our ancestry or our ethnic descent communities. Rather, what is important here is how these writers imagine living in a world with a past that must be reconciled or how they imagine the past in order to cope with the demands historical precedent brings to bear on present-day living. Benedict Anderson’s second appendix to his 1991 edition of *Imagined Communities* usefully frames the question in terms of national community: “how, and why, [do] new-emerging nations imagine themselves antique?” (xiv). In the early modern period, he argues, nations were felt as new, revolutionary forms, as was the temporal “stuff” called history.<sup>2</sup> As nationalism

emerged, nationalists reconfigured preceding revolutions as historical precedents for their own, adopting the trope of an “awakening” national consciousness (194-95). Rather than seeing themselves inventing a community, they gained the (re)assurance of “rediscovering something deep-down always known” (196). Thus nationalism formed in the crucible of modernity as a bizarre new sense of how we exist in relation to the past: “Awareness of being imbedded in secular, serial time, with all its implication of continuity, yet of ‘forgetting’ the experience of this continuity—product of the ruptures of the late eighteenth century—engenders the need for a narrative of ‘identity’”(205). We can see, here, the creation of a sense of teleological identity or even, I would insist, the historicist dialectic as a response to the identity crises caused by modern, scientific notions of time. This is also, anticipating Jean-Luc Nancy, our sense of individual and communal *destiny* or purpose, which locates our identity in a work to be done.

At this point, I am most interested in the implication that modern, ethnicity-centered identity, in this case specifically ethno-nationalism, can be seen as a solution to a problem—the inadequacy of medieval identity to life in the modern world. Insofar as the new conception of history (empty, secular, serial time) was a cause of this loss of identity, its resolution would have to also address time, would need to invent a historical narrative of origins to replace the origin myths of medieval belief systems. In other words, the nation—so often personified as a sentient being—needed something like a *buildungsroman* to explain itself to itself. In American history, this narrative has its core episodes in the 1776 Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the settlement of the West that we may choose to remember as the Indian Wars, and World War II. Each of these

episodes, which are utopian in the mythic sense, has been used discursively to define a particular, patriotic American national identity. In part one I offer examples of several novels that reimagine these moments postethnically. In chapter one, Morrison's *A Mercy* remembers a forgotten diversity in the time of the "founding fathers" and colonial resistance to monarchy. In chapter two, Roth's *The Plot Against America* imaginatively reverses the utopian moment of "the greatest generation" and the role of global liberator. In chapter three, Silko's *Garden in the Dunes* complicates the story of the "pioneers" and the progress of Manifest Destiny. I place the Silko's turn-of-the-century novel last in this sequence, achrononistically, because her non-linear sense of time indicates the spacing rather than the timing of inter-cultural contact and the negotiation of utopias, and her ecological garden trope prepares us for the geographical focus of the next part.

In part two, the geography of the present becomes negotiable as the important features of our landscape are made available for inventive cartography. That is, if no longer defined exclusively in terms of our innermost identities or inextricable station in society, our "place" in the world must depend upon something between utterly free choice and resignation. In other words, postethnic cartography is a balance between thinking that the world depends only on our descriptions of it and the opposite thought that our redescriptions cannot change anything. In my introduction, I take up in greater detail Nancy's proposal of "inoperative community," which defines community as a *spacing* of individuals. This spacing offers us another way to think through utopia and identity, but can quickly give way to idealism and objectivism if we insist too strongly on either consciousness or experience as the arbitrator of our locations. An important

additional concept here is Chakrabarty's proposal for a theory of "fragments without wholes," a paradigm that allows for the theorization of communities of *proximity* rather than *identity* (his terms). In this model, my community comprises the people with whom I interact rather than people like myself, people with whom I share a "background." The difference here is between relating to people actively and passively being related to them, e.g. by blood. This guideline creates a very different map of the world than the one that obtains when we survey only from the point of view or in the interests of one ethnic group.

In part two, chapter one, we see the conjunction of proximity and destiny, relationships and boundary marking in Michael Chabon's *Yiddish Policeman's Union*, which opposes a ethno-religious utopian imperative with a personal choice. The autonomy of the postethnic individual to have some choice in how to see the world and his or her place is also a principle tenet of existentialism but too often gives way, in the constructed nonethnicity of whiteness, to a panoptical hubris—to the colonial or anthropological tourist. In chapter two, I argue that ostensible nonethnicity can be dealt with if its privileged authority is more deeply questioned. Richard Power's connectivist imagination, exemplified in *Plowing the Dark*, retools the all-seeing, dislocated existential observer as an embodied, relational point of view. This embodiment of the artist entails an ecological paradigm of art not as the ethnocentric adjudication of experience but rather as the interpersonal, postethnic sharing of the world around us. Thus the artist becomes an actor in the world, but his or her actions are indirect insofar as they act through symbol or art. This "trickery" holds both the key to why imaginative



language works and what it is able to accomplish. The jester figure emerges here as an important herald of postethnic transgression, which I explore, in chapter three, through the novels of Gerald Vizenor. The trickster, here specifically the Anishinaabe cultural hero Nanabozho, is an “amoral” survivor, thwarting alike the forces of evil that threaten culture and the sacred traditions that constitute a culture. The trickster walks, postethnically, the line between defending a people and being their internal voice of critique. Trickster tactics—what Vizenor would call *teases*—are a strategic intervention, one that opens the possibility for both libratory and destructive transgression. This radical openness to cultural rupture ties into Paul Ricœur’s theory of utopia as the rupture of identity. It is the rupture of the ethnocentric, static identities in favor of an always ongoing—always *present*—postethnic process of identification.

The future, in part three, sees both the rhetorical acrobatics and ecological grounding of postethnic utopianism emerge more clearly. This is partly due to a well-known predilection for the apocalyptic or cataclysmic narrative in environmental rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> Although I work, in this chapter, with both the two oldest novels in my argument, the fascinations of ecological collapse narrative shows no sign of abating, as the popularity of Cormack McCarthy’s *The Road* can attest. But I argue, in the context of the postethnic, that the future must be seen simply, radically open. The postethnic prospective denies that there is *one* history of progress that could predict the future, or that there is *one* person, the prophet, to whom it may be revealed. The future is the ultimate “post” because, *qua* future, it is always post-now. The future does not exist only for the sake of those now living, but will also be decided on by those who live in it, who

do not live now. For us in the present, this means that we cannot make our decisions only for our own generation. We have to confront problems intergenerationally, like good ancestors, as for example in the renowned (and recently commercialized) practice of deliberating consequences unto the seventh generation. This is, in different terms, what Jacques Derrida means by a “messianic without messianism” in *The Spirit of Marx*, in which his only mention of utopianism has the usual pejorative cast. Derrida rejects the “blackboard” paradigm in which we can map out on a blank slate the solutions to all our problems (1994, 97). What he argues for, instead, is an intergenerational commitment in terms of a conjuration by the past that haunts us and a noncommittal stance to remain receptive to whatever comes, the *arrivant* (81). This is a dedication, an oath, to justice without a pledge to see only a particular, preconditioned outcome as justice. It is, I insist, a postethnic commitment to someone else, someone who is not necessarily like me. It is worth pausing too to notice that Derrida’s figure of the ghost is none other than the figure of Hamlet’s father, the father of arguably the first literary representation of a modern individual with an interior identity. Thus what haunts us here haunts us as identity-bearing beings, who sense ourselves as selves that might or might not be. Moreover, remaining thoroughly open to what we have yet to meet, that which arrives, means that we cannot insist on a conformity or commensuration of the unmet stranger to our selfsame identities or our self-interests.

In part three, I return to the question of teleology, but this time at the other end of the axis: what is at stake is not the myth of origin but the revelation of prophecy. How can we be exhorted to reform if we must remain open to any kind of future at all? One

could argue that we ought not to imagine *any* particular future because that image might be used to make certain forcible demands in the present. But there is, I argue, a way of imagining the future that turns on the playful rather than the speculative imagination, using a sense of wonder to explore rather than a destiny to fulfill rigidly, in a pre-determined fashion. In chapter one, Octavia Butler's apocalyptic, survival novel *Parable of the Sower* imagines a future religion, Earthseed, that makes a spiritual virtue of embracing change rather than transcendental certainty. This spiritualism is reversed, in chapter two, in the anti-spiritual apocalypse of Kurt Vonnegut's *Galapagos*, a future in which the human species is changed "back" into what we recognize as animals rather than moving "forward" to the stars. Reading these two works alongside each other, we see a range of future-writing, from the expansive to the implosive, but each evokes a cooperative and negotiable sense of community. The best articulation, to my knowledge, of future-writing that welcomes whatever strange things may come is Ursula K. Le Guin's Hanish cycle. Le Guin's science fiction projects a future communitarian structure called the "Ekumen" which lets readers play with long, non-teleological views of time and wide-open, generous conceptions of humanity. The theme of this imaginary future is the "household," which shares etymological roots with *economy* and *ecology*, along with the sense of keeping things in balance. This "housekeeping," I propose, is the best inoperative model for doing good in a world in which no one ideal work can be universally applied to everyone all at once.

In the afterword to this study, I remark that a postethnic utopia, as it is being written in recent and contemporary American novels, has become a political urgency in a

world whose problems are not longer confined to traditionally separated kinds of human experiences. The problems of the poor are also the problems of the rich; what confronts the oppressed also confronts the empowered; the problems of women are also the problems of men; the problems of the East and South are also the problems of the West and North. More specifically, no one “ethnicity” gives us the high ground, the location from which to survey the damage and direct the solution. The challenges that confront us now are increasingly overdetermined by the productions of late capitalism and cannot be easily separated into agendas for human rights or environmentalism. Social justice and environmental justice must be consubstantial, and the last boundary that a robust postethnic utopianism must transgress is the dividing line between the human and nonhuman systems of the planet. Our challenges arise in the interconnectedness of all things and, in particular, of all ethnicities; it is there that we must try to imagine the answers.

## INTRODUCTION / UTOPIAS, IDENTITIES, COMMUNITIES

### Chapter 1: The Spirit of Critique and Hope

Utopia is a literary genre, a cognitive operation, and a field of discourse. It is also simply and most famously a pun on homophonous prefixes—the Greek *eu* and *u*— that could indicated both the good and the nonexistent. The utopian literary genre, narrowly defined, is a fictional narrative account of a fantastic world constructed against the backdrop of the real world. As Darko Suvin’s specific and, to my mind, supremely useful definition has it, in terms that already link up community and temporality, traditional straight-up utopias are “the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author’s community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis” (1979, 49). Whereas naturalist fictions might give us imaginary representations of the real world, utopian fictions give us imaginative constructions of worlds that are unreal and cued for comparison to the real. Such comparative activity can unfold not only along the “more perfect” line that Suvin defines for utopias proper but also includes contrastive relationships that produce dystopia and anti-utopia as well. This comparative operation makes utopian fiction at once fantastic and political; thinking about the present world in terms of what it *is not* opens the door on utopia as a cognitive operation. This cognition, utopian thinking, has been theorized and categorized in as

many different ways as the utopian literary genre has been named. We will take up two major threads of the theory utopian thinking, hope and critique, in this chapter.

Otherwise, let me note that utopia as a genre of writing and utopia as a process of thinking form the matrix for utopia as a field of discourse. By this, I mean simply that some of our interactions can be defined within the terms of utopian writing and thought, especially in the American context where so many utopian tropes are part of our national vocabulary. We talk about the good that we would like to achieve, whether it is the good that we all agree on, and whether it is the good that our ancestors (or simply our parents) wished for us to have. I argue, in subsequent chapters, that we can no longer have such conversations only within a selfsame identity group. Increasingly, utopian discourse must cross the boundary lines between our sociocultural categories, an activity that I approach through the lens of ethnicity and solidarity. The need to continue such conversations seems always more urgent in the face of a crowded, fast-moving, and perilous world. Yet we remain cautious, and rightly so, because many if not all of the perils that confront us now are the products of the utopian discourses of the past.

We have in mind infamous totalitarian and domineering projects when we use *utopia* pejoratively to indicate an idealistic dream or scheme created by one or a few privileged individuals who presumably intend to improve the lives of everyone.

Idealistic, revolutionary utopias are seen either as sad, if they result in failed communes and abandoned “intentional communities,” or terribly dangerous if they lead us to the gas chamber and the Gulag. While many if not all scholars of utopia rehabilitate the term to mean precisely that which might keep us safe from totalitarianism, the pejorative sense of

the word is not without warrant. In Plato's *Republic*, when Socrates is asked what the ideal kingdom would look like, should we be surprised that the philosopher responds by describing the rule of a philosopher king? "The beautiful portrait of the sovereign," Karl Popper observes, "is a self-portrait" (1965, 155). Popper invites us to adopt a human Socratic irony, to take compassion on Plato, "who had to be satisfied with establishing the first professorship, instead of the first kingship, of philosophy" (155). But this is, of course, a strategic compassion, for although Popper exclaims, "what a monument of human smallness is this idea of the philosopher king" (156), the entire thrust of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* is against the very great harm this idea of greatness has caused, and against the great threat it still poses. Popper's opposition to Platonic totalitarian justice and "utopian engineering" is apt, and I will return to it. The link between total theory and the utopian scheme *à la* Plato is clear: what we must ask is what becomes of our utopias after our theories have become fragmented.

It is startling to find how central ethnicity and ethnic separation are to Plato. His ideal republic is legitimated by, as Popper writes it, The Myth of Blood and Soil. This "noble lie," this basic propaganda, dupes the people with a story that reifies their stations in life as their essential natures: the rulers are imbued with gold and silver, the peasants with iron and copper. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* reworks this idea in a toxic "utopia" where the noble lie has been made true: Alphas, Betas, Gammas and so on are genetically engineered for their particular roles in society. This Republic appears as a serious description of Plato's ideal social order,<sup>1</sup> which places a privileged, all-knowing, and benevolent authority (the philosopher) in charge of the ignorant masses (the people

duped into contentment). The noble lie, of course, is a kind of “ethnic ideology,” an outgrowth of Plato’s conviction that a harmonious social order depends upon keeping different kinds people in different kinds of places or roles in society. This harmonious economy was consubstantial, for Plato, with Idealism in epistemology and aesthetics, as Popper argues throughout. The current diversification of our political worlds—and our social worlds as well—is a kind of ethnic fragmentation. We cannot now as easily believe ourselves to be part of a community of people completely and only like ourselves, and this is why at the end of the introduction, we will return to the problem of the fragment—historical, personal, aesthetic fragments— and how a thinking of the fragment is required for a rethinking of utopia along ethnically fragmented, or, postethnic lines. Plato’s propaganda myth makes the citizens of the Republic happy with the way things are because they accept them as the way things must “naturally” be. This kind of myth is becoming less and less tenable today, even where it has been tacitly assumed. This means two things: one, we are less likely to believe that society should serve in the interests of one kind of person, and two, we must become accustomed to the fact that no one point of view will be able to see the solution to our most urgent social, political, or ecological problems.

*The Republic* is the kind of Romanic utopia resulting in the imagination of an ideal or a perfect life, a kind of utopianism directed towards the “end of history,” the final unchanging product of the historical dialectic and its necessary upheavals, of biological evolution and its necessary extinctions. Importantly, there is also a tradition of utopia as satire—Northrop Frye called it a kind of Menippean satire, a fantastic, often frenetic



satire on the arrogance of knowledge. Frye's now dated definition of utopia emphasizes the quality of a "single intellectual pattern" fixated on a central problem and solution that the utopian writer satirizes (1957, 310). For example, in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, solving the problem of distribution and monopoly holds the key to the future; in B.F. Skinner's *Walden II*, behaviorist pedagogy is the key; in Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, it is sustainability and holistic naturalism. The two faces of utopia, the romantic and the satiric, with their various inflections through the lenses of eutopia, dystopia, anti-utopia, and so on, do not differ in their basic assumption of what Popper calls "utopian engineering." Both the romantic dreaming and the satiric mockery of utopia have been conducted from a single point of view and towards a single problem. This paradigm was true for most utopias through the mid-twentieth century and is the paradigm described by Frye and critiqued by Popper. Arguably in the wake of such a critique, but more likely in the wake of the sociopolitical violence Popper abhorred, this Idealism and simplicity would no longer do. We shall see, in fact, the reconfiguration of utopia, in critical theory, as something precisely the opposite of the totalitarian idealism of Plato.

This reversal should not be as surprising as it sometimes is: the change is the advent of new descriptions as much as it is a shift in the practice of utopian writing itself. This is not to say that utopian writing is not, on balance, different today than it was long ago. What I mean is that we can find traces of what we now call "critical utopia" long before the late twentieth century. In the following chapters, I take up the discussion of utopia not as a literary genre but rather a discursive field, and so many of the novels I

examine in detail are not utopias novels *per se*, but all of them address the question of utopia as it has been developed in American culture. In other words, the focus is on the writing of utopia, not utopian writings, and so before introducing utopianism in American literature and culture or surveying theories of critical utopia, I digress to illustrate what will become an important distinction between the philosophic or blueprint utopianism I have been describing and its doppelganger, utopia as a rhetorically situated, strategic practice.

Let me clarify with an example. In contrast to the example of Plato above, we have, for instance, the utopian storyteller Hythloday who is featured in Book I of More's *Utopia*. The interlocutive situation presented by More is quite different from the one presented by Plato. In Book I, Hythloday describes an imaginary banquet in which he persuades an influential Cardinal to place a moratorium on capital punishment partly with the example of Tallstoria, an imaginary kingdom in which capital punishment has been abolished with good results (1965, 51-54). In *The Republic*, the utopian scenario is a philosopher's serious attempt to describe the best social order overall; in *Utopia*, the utopian narrative is a rhetorical strategy to persuade an advisor to the King who is accorded king-like respect and power. Morus, More's first person persona in the Latin text, urges Hythloday to actually take his account of utopia to court, but Hythloday refuses. He offers two scenarios in which he might use a utopian narrative (of Nolandia and Happiland, in turn) but would fail to persuade the king to change his mind against the king's own material interests. More frames this as a horizon for the prospects of social reform in societies with private property: what catches my attention, in both cases, is that

these scenarios feature utopian narrative situated in a particular political situation (57-65). The utopian scenario here is never a specific plan for revolution, let alone a vision of the product of revolution. Moreover, the utopian story is called for by rhetorical asymmetry, the overwhelming political authority of the king, and the principle of *kairos*, “opportunity.” In the opportune moment, a courtier or advisor might make use of a utopian yarn to shake up the royal decision making process. In this way, More’s sense of the use of the utopian imagination is closer to what we now call a “critical utopia.”

This does not mean that More’s writing is complete free of the kinds of policies that we associate with domination and conquest, and we should ask how, if at all, the noble lie of essential ethnic or class identity changes from Plato in Book II of *Utopia*. Whereas Plato’s racialism kept the iron and brass peasantry separate from the silver aristocracy, and even the aristocracy separate from the supreme race, the golden philosophers, More’s *Utopia* is more concerned with claiming essential national identity. It does this by assuming a certain character of the “utopians” placed in contrast with those on the mainland or “here in England.” More’s *Utopia* actual frees up internal class hierarchies—most famously through communal property—but does sketch out the imperial-national-colonial ideology of race that would come to mark both history and the history of utopian writing for the next several centuries. Amid the jests and jibes about golden toilets and so on, More sneaks in several social policies that would have been progressive for the court of Henry VIII, but which we now recognize as the forerunners of colonial ideology. On the one hand, the citizens of Utopia are free to travel without the king’s written permission. On the other hand, they have a policy of seizing the land

from lesser nations on the mainland if those nations are not making good use of it. Based on particular beliefs about what land is for in the first place (e.g. a particular kind of productivity), this land seizure prefigures justifications for the theft of immeasurable resources from colonial territories up to the present day. *Utopia* stands, then, at the end of royal monarchy and at the threshold of colonial empire.

More's utopianism contains both serious reforms (e.g. freedom to travel, communal living) and playful satire (the gold chamber pot bit) with a will for total management that we would later come to regard as principally colonial and, in some sense, modern. This sums up the ambivalence of utopia, a figure of not only libertarianism *vis-à-vis* monarchic authoritarianism but also totalitarianism for the sake of exhaustive problem-solving. Utopias since have continued to oscillate between these two functions, and we have tended to call "utopias" only those that are more literally minded. Francis Bacon takes up again the philosopher king in *The New Atlantis*, although revising the elite to a council of scientists called "The House of Solomon." But Maragaret Cavendish imagines an outright silly *Blazing World* that has more in common with Lewis Carol's fantastic wonderland than a speculative utopia like Bacon's. The feminist utopian tradition, perhaps the strongest revolutionary subgenre, occupies just about every iteration of the form from fantasy to romance to dystopia. *Blazing World*, published in 1666, brings us near the historical setting of Morrison's *A Mercy* in colonial America. If we define a first wave of utopias energized by the excitement of European exploration and "discovery" of new worlds, then we can identify a second wave of utopias energized by the revolutions in America and France. This revolutionary utopianism generated more

serious blueprints than the earlier, more deliberately fictional forms. Fourier, for example, was sincere about his phalanxes, and Bellamy spent the rest of his life after the publication of *Looking Backwards* trying to make its imaginary reforms actually come true. As time went on, people began to believe in utopia in a different and more dangerous way.

Accordingly, many of the utopian tropes and slogans in American culture are taken for granted as the commonground of public discourse. The shining city on the hill is perhaps the oldest and most potent among these. But also ubiquitous and still powerful is the “land of immigrants” and the “melting pot.” Over and behind all these of course is “the new world,” which returns again and again to proclaim both new frontiers of opportunity and the more sinister overtones of a “New World Order.” In the new world, the colonial mission to tame the land and civilize the natives is welded tightly to the promise of personal growth and fulfillment. The indispensability *and* impossibility of a melting pot utopia is indicated by Kenneth Roemer in the introduction to his landmark edited collection *America as Utopia*. Roemer concludes with a convincing explication of the centrality of America to utopian studies and vice versa. As he argues,

...studies of American utopian literature are essential for anyone who wants to understand America. The inclusiveness of the utopias and their revelations about basic hopes and fears make them fascinating indices to American attitudes. This is especially so because American history is in part a history of potential dystopias and eutopias: the dystopian aura of the “howling wilderness,” the genocide in the name of Manifest Destiny, the horrors of slavery, the nightmares of rampant commercialism, technology, urban squalor, Vietnam, Watergate, and energy shortages; and the eutopian impulse of Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill,” Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, the possibilities for rebirth in the “virgin” West, the idealism of youth and civil rights movements, New Deals, New Frontiers, and Great Societies, and the technology and spirit that sent Americans to the moon

and a bicentennial Viking to Utopia. To know America, we must have knowledge of America as utopia. (1981,14)

Although Roemer gestures to the “inclusiveness” of American utopias, his list of eutopian and dystopian elements in American life quickly reveal inclusiveness to be the principal problem, the very point at which utopias clash. We cannot forget that “the possibilities for rebirth in the ‘virgin’ West” take place on the same ground as “the genocide in the name of Manifest Destiny.” As far as I can see, up until recently, one person’s utopia was always another person’s dystopia, and this is one of the reasons the present study aims at discovering, in American novelists, the ways in which *utopias* or, to use a less ambiguous term, the *social imaginary ideal* can no longer be “for” only one kind of person.

Utopianism in America unfolds along several fronts, including political rhetoric, actual intentional communities, and literary utopias. Above, Roemer already outlines the utopianism of the American national narrative: the New World, the City on a Hill, the Frontier, the Union, the American Dream. One could say that every American community has been an intentional community, from the first colonial settlements to the Shakers to the all-black towns such as Rosewood. Communities like the Amish still conduct their lives against the general grain of American society. But we tend to reserve the phrase *intentional community* for smaller isolated projects, usually of a communal-agrarian nature. The most famous of these nineteenth-century Massachusetts Brook Farm, which fostered several counter-cultural agendas including women’s rights and

abolition. Thus Americans have quite often answered the at-large utopian political tone with many smaller, politically radical communities within the American landscape.

The “real” utopianism, large and small, of American lives intersects with the American literary utopia most strikingly, and painfully, in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, which is based on the author’s experience living at Brook Farm in 1841. In that novelization of an intentional community, Roy Male writes, “Hawthorne arrived at his definitive criticism of the recurring American efforts at transformation without tragedy” (1978, 297). This is the effort that Roemer underscores, and it is an effort to which American literature has often responded. American fiction, like American politics, has not often been able to avoid some utopian inflection. We could argue, along these lines, that any regional or frontier fiction—any writing with a strong sense of a circumscribed and unique place—participates in the “local” utopian spirit of American communities. We could also argue that any progressive novel—any writing that responds to a particular wave of social upheaval or uncertainty—evokes the “national” self-image of America as innovative, revolutionary, forward-thinking, or “utopian.” American literary utopias must then be only a part of American utopian discourse, which infuses all American literature, not only the utopian genre. While there is a rich tradition of utopian novels *per se* in American literature, it is this broadest category of utopia as discourse that I deploy in selecting the American novelists as evidence for the arrival of a postethnic utopian sensibility.

Rather than a simple demonstration of the volume of American utopian writing, it may make the point better to observe simply that many American writers accorded

canonical standing include a utopian work or two in their catalog. This does not mean that there is not a preponderance of neglected utopian work in noncanonical American literature. One of the few exhaustive period studies in the “recovery” mode is Jean Pfaelzer’s *The Utopian Novel in America, 1886-1896: The Politics of Form* (1985). Pfaelzer convincingly argues that a boom in utopian literature, largely forgotten today with exception of Bellamy’s 1888 *Looking Backwards*, responded to the socio-cultural rupture of reconstruction. In other words, utopia is not only that which undercuts the norm, but it can also be the formal maneuver that steps in when a disrupting event has occurred. This is a similar approach to the one taken by Jennifer Burwell in *Notes on Nowhere: Feminism, Utopian Logic, and Social Transformation* (1997), in which critical feminist utopian novels are read alongside feminist political revolutions in American culture, neither simply predicting nor reacting to them. It may or may not be “exceptionalist” to say that American society has always been transforming in one way or another. Of the best known American utopias, some are written by famous, canonical writers such as Hawthorne’s *Blithedale Romance*, Mark Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, William Dean Howell’s *A Traveler from Altruria*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*, Jack London’s *The Iron Heel*, and Lewis Sinclair’s *It Can’t Happen Here*. Most utopias after the mid-twentieth century, with some notable exceptions such as Callanbach’s *Ecotopia*, are shelved in the science fiction section. And a small but significant set of American utopian writers are known for their contributions to other discursive fields outside of literature: objectivist philosopher Ayn Rand (*Anthem*),



behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner (*Walden Two*), architect and urban designer James Howard Kunstler (*World Made By Hand*).

Utopianism continues to jump the fence between literature and politics on a regular basis. Thomas Peyser's *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Literary Realism* is an important link in understanding the paradoxical articulation of utopian idealism and realist pragmatism, which in American history is also known as progressivism. The unifying principle of both utopia and pragmatism is "the idea that society was in some fundamental way a construction (like a building) rather than a natural formation (like a leaf)" (1998, 3). Peyser's basic observation that both utopianism and realism allowed for a progressive constructivism to shape a global or cosmopolitan worldview can help us understand why the term utopia would show up in the pragmatism of Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Peyser details convincingly how writers of utopias and realism are united by a desire to pull the veil from the audience's eyes, to show that the world is a construct and as such is susceptible to reconstruction (8-10). Given the acronym IROS by prominent utopian theorist Ruth Levitas (2007), this imaginary reconstitution of society is only half the story. Perhaps we should be satisfied to let the reconstruction be reified and thus always await a new generation of "strong poets" and "utopian revolutionaries" to tear it down again; these are the prophets that Rorty calls for and the prospect he seems satisfied with under the banner of *ironism*. Then again, we might want to think about the possibility of an image of society that needs less reification of the *social* as the *natural* because it does not believe these are so different that one can mask the other. In terms of identity and the prospect

for the good life, the social and the natural return as questions of nature versus nurture. And, in the more specific terms of my argument, opening up the prospects for the good beyond the values of any one particular socio-ethnic group would mean opening up our conceptions of what is possible for human nature. Further, this possibility would be post-identitarian in the spirit of post-humanism. What is at stake here is precisely what we will count as “natural” in both the green and essentialist senses of the word. But the question of how natural our social reifications actually are brings us to the relationship between the demystification of critique and the mystical experience of hope, and thus to the intersection of utopia and critical theory.

A new wave of utopian studies emerged in the late 1970s and into the 1980s as critical and literary theorists responded to cultural representations tied to the postcolonial, civil rights and counterculture movements, as well as, into the 1990s, the end of Soviet-style communism. That Marxism had ever been utopian is a controversial claim: certainly, Engels drew a sharp contrast between doing the hard work of real revolution and playing pretend with fantasies of perfection (1880/1970). But Ernst Bloch and later Fredric Jameson have worked the Marxist-utopian line, and even in the seeming victory of capital we can still speak, with Derrida, about a utopian “spirit of Marx” that continues to haunt us despite the fact that we can no longer legitimately imagine a workers’ paradise after the finale of communism’s historical dialectic. Thus, with the foreclosure of many earlier waves of utopianism, scholars at the end of the twentieth century have reaffirmed utopia’s rhetorical and discursive functions over its speculative and totalizing ones. Whereas earlier writers were able to imagine a total ideal in the terms of one

particular group—whether generically Anglo utopians, or women (Gillman’s *Herland*), or workers (in Marx)—we cannot do so anymore because, as we return to the rhetorical or interlocutive uses of utopia, we find that we are no longer addressing a singular king, authority, regime, or political body but rather a polity made up increasingly of many different kinds of people.

One useful heuristic for charting the field of utopian theory, I might offer in light of this return, is the counterbalance of *hope* and *critique*. Perhaps the best, certainly the most sweeping explication of utopia as hope is with Ernst Bloch, who, as I have already mentioned, tells us that Marxism itself is a kind of utopian project. Bloch’s “principle of hope” is not limited only to the vision of a proletarian revolution, however. The first words of *The Spirit of Utopia* existentially evoke identity and community: “I am. We are. That is enough. Now we have to begin.” (1964/2000, 1). This stirring line indicates the communitarian commitment not only to communism but also to hope and life that extends beyond oneself in others. We might label this the optimistic, centrifugal force of utopia, which is nothing less than “the right thing, for which it is worth to live, to be organized, and to have time” (3). Drawing on the vocabulary employed by Jean-Luc Nancy, we can see that this utopian spirit calls us to a *communion* in a worthy cause rather than a less mystical *communication* and cooperation of our several needs and desires (1991, 19). Bloch’s principle tends toward not only *one* hope, or hope for *all* people, but even a *unified hope of all people*. To his credit, Bloch does not often proscribe what this hope should be, only that it should be recognized in art and literature. It is precisely in the prescription of the singular hope, by the philosopher king, that

utopianism leads to its uttermost horrors. Those horrors, some of which I have already mentioned, sharpen one critique, Popper's, of utopianism as the ideology of empire. The other critique, Engels's, sees utopianism simply as another kind of opiate that distracts the revolutionary with daydreams. The only way to redeem the utopian hope, here, is to inscribe it with the oppositional and the active. This is precisely what Karl Mannheim does in his pairing of *utopia* and *ideology*, and it is on this contrarian footing that we begin to shift from a the theory of utopia-as-hope to one of utopia-as-critique.

We have already had occasion, with Frye, to connect utopia and epistemology in the riots of Menippean satire. Not coincidentally, Mannheim's principal topic is a sociology of knowledge, a *material* epistemology that "seeks to comprehend thought in the concrete setting of an historical-social situation" and also a *communal* one because "men living in groups...think with and against one another." For Mannheim, the differences between ethnic groups are merely the differences in the "particular style of thought" developed "in an endless series of responses to certain typical situations characterizing their common position" (1949, 3). In this setting, *ideology* and *utopia* are not complimentary ways of thinking against the present moment: ideology "conceals the present by attempting to comprehend it in terms of the past" while utopia "transcends the present and is oriented to the future" (86 n. 2). Thus both ideology and utopia are "incongruent" with present reality, but whereas ideological incongruencies are "effective in the realization and the maintenance of the existing order of things," utopian incongruencies "burst the ends of the existing order" (173). We can take this incongruence to mean something like the independence of the image from its ostensible

referent. Mannheim tells us that “society is possible...because individuals in it carry around in their heads some sort of picture of society” (1964, xxiii). This picture or image—importantly located within each individual—leads us directly to Louis Althusser’s famous first thesis, according to which “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (1971). The utopian, here, is one aspect of the incongruence that makes this an imaginary relationship rather than a mechanical coupling. What Althusser christens as the “ideological state apparatus” is particularly dedicated to maintaining the status quo, making the future as much like the present as possible.<sup>2</sup> What maintains the order of things, at least sociologically, then, is not an essential identity adhering to its own true nature, but rather a belief transmitted through material reality. The materiality of this transmission is, of course, Althusser’s second thesis. Shifting our vocabulary, we can say, perhaps simplistically, that individual and group identities are the products of a social imagination maintained by the symbolic action of social images and objects. However, I will argue later by drawing from the work of Elaine Scarry that the images and objects around us transmit not only ideology but also compassion.

A quick aside, here, will show that utopian discourse can be usefully configured as an identity-community problem when we underscore the potential of critical literary study to analyze the dynamics of social continuity or transformation. Working closely from Mannheim and Althusser, James Kavanagh instructively glosses ideology as a conceptual image of both society and one’s place in it, which comes to dominate “social reproduction,” specifically the continuous reproduction of existing class relationships to

the benefit of dominant class (1995, 308-309). This process of social reproduction carries on through countless material interpellations, one of which, of course, is the interpellation of literary narrative. J. Hillis Miller, in the same volume, arrives at the topic of social reproduction from the study of narrative rather than ideology, but, as with Kavanagh, the core issue is still the “passing on” of cultural values, through the socialization of readers, that is, the process of making the next generation as much like the present one as possible. Or, as Miller says, “Fictions keep us in line and tend to make us more like our neighbors” (1995, 69). At the risk of stretching the production/reproduction metaphor too far, I suggest that within the paradigm of social reproduction, ideology is something like cultural DNA. You inherit it from your “parent” culture(s), which may or may not leave you, in the worlds of Gerald Vizenor, a crossblood. In this biological metaphor, utopia is the principle of mutation itself.

Miller also reminds us that while “fiction” can perform its ideological “police function” because it works at the site of ideology (the images in our heads), its status *as fiction* also opens the door for radical deviation from the norm. “In a novel,” the critic insists, “alternative assumptions can be entertained or experimented with—not as in the real world, where such experimentations might have dangerous consequences, but in the imaginary world where, it is easy to assume ‘nothing really happens’”(69). The flexibility (or fictionality) of language that lets it be incongruent (Mannheim’s term) with reality allows for the maintenance of ideological past-directed images that prop up the status quo, and that same flexibility allows for the introduction of future-directed images, utopian mutations, contra the status quo. This flexibility goes by other names as well,

and is in fact the principal tenet underwriting non-representational and deconstructive theories of language in pragmatism and poststructuralism respectively. Because the meaning of language objects depends on something other than their referential alignment with the object world (e.g. on other language objects), language can leverage against other language to bend our understanding of that world in any direction. Theories that celebrate utopia-as-critique generally approach a particular utopian text not on the merits of its specific hope (a speculated solution to a single problem), but rather on the general merits of leveraging the critical utopian imagination at all. Generating a wealth of utopian writings, here, is something like fostering biodiversity. What we are looking for, experimentally, is a durable mutation.

In this way, utopia may be theorized as patently contrarian, that is, contra the present status quo, and therefore excellently if not inherently suited to social critique. Indeed, the paradigm of “critical utopia” has become the state of the art in utopian studies, as utopists understandably want to distance their own positions as quickly as possible from the troubling imperial-positivist utopias of yore.<sup>3</sup> For example, Nicholas Spencer proposes, in *After Utopia*, a genology of “critical space” in American fiction, e.g. “the fictionalizations of spatiality that identify, analyze, oppose, and imagine alternatives to the forms of social domination implemented by American capitalism.” (2006, 10). Thus critique itself is given not only an analytical but also an imaginative dimension because seeing clearly *what is* depends also on seeing *what is not*. But the term “utopia” still retains the pejorative sense that Engels used, i.e. the impossible dream that distracts us from practical actions, the fantasy of perfection that is the enemy of the real good.<sup>4</sup>

The quieting of revolutionary desire through its displacement into the future or into a regulation rather than a promise is what prompts Derrida to eschew the term in *Specters of Marx*.<sup>5</sup> In human rights studies, Mark Goodale points to an ongoing “skepticism about the utopianism” that accompanies human rights universality (contrasted with universalism) and its “cosmopolitan optimism...of those visionary elites who took it upon themselves to build a framework for perpetual peace from the ruins of mid-century last” (2009, 14). In the context of environmentalism, David Ehrenfeld, in a book chapter on community no less, insists that something called the “Utopia fallacy” prevents genuine conceptions of intergenerational justice (2009, 203-10ff). I point to these three studies in diverse fields—literary history, anthropology and human rights, and environmental studies—to indicate the multifaceted presence utopia still has in our most urgent discourses. For the most part, blithe hope is still held the antithesis of hard-headed critique, with only the desire for change as their common characteristic.

This desired change is theorized by Paul Ricœur as the “rupture,” of the status quo. Building on Mannheim’s work, early in the century, and anticipating the poststructural and postcolonial version of utopia-as-critique which we see presently, Ricœur argues it is the duty of a modern philosopher to interpret signs and ideology through a hermeneutic point of view between ethics and politics and focused on setting up basic rights in terms of wealth distribution and social justice. Rather than Plato’s philosopher kings, in Ricœur philosophers are critical thinkers who see through the threefold workings of ideology: reality dissimulation, the legitimating of the authorities, and, finally, social integration. Ideology is always hiding the gap between the agendas of



those in power and the best interest of those who are subject to that power. Thus, ideology and utopia are reconceptualized as integration/identity and rupture/critique (1986). In making this argument, Ricœur does not actually challenge the assumption that the stability of social order relies on the fixed identitarian loyalties of its individual subjects, the same assumption underwriting Plato's myth of blood and soil. Yet by questioning the value of stability, demonstrating that critique is "unstable" and causes identities to fluctuate, Ricœur shows us how the wild flights of hope and the nuts-and-bolts of critique are alike in their disruption of the status quo. I would go further by insisting that a thoroughgoing critical utopian mutation here must not only destabilize particular identities, but also be a break away from particularism itself as a form of essentialist subjectivity. Which is to say, again, that critical utopias must be postethnic.

Perhaps the most influential proponent of the utopia-as-critique school is Tom Moylan, who along with Bill Ashcroft deploys the phrase "critical utopia" to good effect. Moylan has a better eye for the dark side of utopia than Bloch, Mannheim, or Ricœur, and he is quick to point out that earlier utopian writings were counter-ideologies rather than counters to ideology. Moylan differentiates three stages in the evolution of utopian literature: the early "totalizing blueprints," works which set in stone every detail of the perfect society, leaving little or no room for maneuver or change; dystopias like Huxley's *Brave New World* and Zamyatin's *We*, which attack present social systems for their centralization of power, suppression of the individual, mass production, and materialistic values but offer no viable alternatives to these abuses<sup>6</sup>; and finally, the utopias featured and praised by Moylan as "critical utopias" (1986, 1-12). These are critical in a dual

sense: they critique existing social institutions and values and, at the same time, achieve the “*critical mass* required to make the necessary explosive reaction” (10, emphasis original). This last is the criterion upon which Moylan will praise or condemn a work or aspects of it: Does it provide a visible *means* or *process* by which change can be effected? The utopian, especially feminist, literature that springs to life around revolutionary social justice movements is what Moylan deems “critical” and has several defining characteristics. It is militant, often portraying the necessity of violent opposition to the status quo; it represents choices between multiple options rather than a fixed agenda; it is achieved through human will and action rather than as the result of fate or natural accident; and it is a continuing process with problems and challenges still to be resolved (41-46). Critical utopias as an “oppositional cultural practice” (12) do not imagine a particular change but rather offer images of change itself, outlining the possibility for difference. The utopian novel, then, is a kind of mental gymnastics. The result is a forced expansion in the processing power of the reader so that alternative values can be contemplated—an act of political consciousness-raising.

Indeed, four novels that Moylan offers in the second half of *Demand the Impossible* force the reader to rethink the most basic assumptions about the relationships between science, society, and the individual at every level from the sexual and economic to the temporal and spatial. Here postethnicity comes into the picture, in utopian literature as in the countercultural movement at large. As Moylan describes it,

[t]he opposition... is no longer to be found limited to that of a single vanguard party or, at the other pole, an expression of pure negation and terror. The political

opposition, at least since the late 1960s... is made up of a variety of autonomous movements grouped loosely in an historical anti-hegemonic bloc. (27)

This is at the core of Moylan's observations that utopian projects fail to generate that critical edge which forces us to continually challenge the values and goals which are the soul of any society. The critical voice keeps society self-conscious and dynamic, keeps it alive, is a voice that cannot belong to any single master architect.

We could argue over membership and pecking order in the “anti-hegemonic bloc,” which Moylan “divide[s] into three areas: feminism, ecology, and self-management both of the workplace and the sphere of daily life,” with the third area including ethnic and cultural self-determination (27). There is no lack of good candidates here. We could say that feminism should lead the way against patriarchy with gender as the category of identification, because everyone has one. We could say that Marxism should lead the way against capitalism because class struggle is the core of the historical dialectic, or because we think of transforming class relations in a way different from how we think of transforming race relations (this is the point that Walter Benn Michaels makes in his critique of Philip Roth’s *Plot Against America*, which I address in part one). I follow the lead of several theorists in using ethnicity as the principle category for thinking about radically different forms of identity. “Ethnicity,” Stuart Hall says, and I agree with him, “is what we all require in order to think the relationship between identity and difference” (1989, 18). The difference here is not only the difference between peoples but also the difference between the status quo and the alternative. Yet we must remember that the “verbal construction” (to recall Suvin) of an alternative elsewhere is

grounded in its comparative relationship to our actual, present position in the world. Hall continues,

There is no way, it seems to me, in which people of the world can act, can speak, can create, can come in from the margins and talk, can begin to reflect on their own experience unless they come from some *place*, they come from some history, they inherit some cultural traditions. What we've learned about the theory of enunciation is that there's no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself *somewhere* in order to say anything at all. Thus, we cannot do without that sense of our own positioning that is connoted by the term ethnicity. (18)

I hasten to emphasize that “positionality,” for Hall and for myself, is not a monolith, a one-place inherently assigned or occupied by one group, tribe, or ethnicity. I bring in this point now, alongside Moylan’s critical utopia, because my core argument remains that our utopias nowadays, for pragmatic reasons, must be postethnic. Nevertheless, the question of ethnicity, and indeed the very term *postethnic*, is a thorny theoretical issue in its own right, one that I must set aside until the next chapter. The point, for now, is that critical utopias are a matter of positioning, from here to get there, and that thinking through both this position and any possible movement elsewhere requires a working concept of identity as framed by the logic of ethnicity.

Arriving at the term “critical utopia” from a political rather than epistemological or narrative direction, Bill Ashcroft helpfully sorts imperial or philosophical utopias under the heading of “product,” i.e. the utopian form, and the contrarian critical utopian function under the heading of “process” (2007, 412). (The perennial problem is, of course, that any process produces products.) Thus the “imperialism of utopia,” which in following other critics, Ashcroft ascribes to More rather than Plato, derives from the

absolutism of finalized production, whereas the revolutionary energy of postcolonial (or, anti-imperial) utopianism has the recurring energy of an ongoing, open-ended process. I maintain, as the reader might expect, that More's Book I shows us that utopian fictions are a rhetorical strategy, i.e. oriented more toward process than product. But More's Book II does, clearly, imagine the world according to a colonizing point of view, and the postcolonial version of critical utopia operates, in literature, as an overturning of the literary tradition that More initiated as a way of challenging the political history of empire. The most substantial case made for such literary-political revision is Ralph Pordzik's sweeping comparative study *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia* (2001), which underlines nicely, in fact, how the problems of national and cultural identity in postcolonial discourse find an analog in the problems for group identity in utopian projections of ideal social orders.

The question can be usefully reiterated in the terms offered by Hall in the context of critical race theory: product utopias assume identity is a matter of *being*, whereas process utopias assume identity is a matter of *becoming*. The need to reconceptualize utopia from a planned product to a planning process parallels a call to "reconceptualize identity as a process of identification...something that happens over time, that is never absolutely stable, that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference" (15). Which is to say, also, that a postcolonial utopia would have to include a postcolonial model of identity, i.e. something performative, contingent, and contestable. Traditional utopias imagine the people living there to be homogenously happy, that is, *everyone* happy and everyone happy *for the same reason*. The process/becoming model of

heterotopia offers instead a less finalized and “total” image of the ideal. Postcolonial heterotopias, according to Pordzik<sup>7</sup>, are characterized by “fragmentation, discontinuity, and ambiguity,” so much so that here any single controlling idea is “constantly undermined by the introduction of new perspective and points of reference that cannot be integrated into a meaningful whole” (2001, 3). If utopian hope or critique is to have any meaning in a world that is continuing to evolve past (or “post”) the many assumptions that determined utopianism’s forms up through modernity, it will require the ability to think of the good life and the common good in a fragmented world that cannot be reduced to a single point of view.

I will suggest, later in the introduction, that such strategies are already being developed in theories of self and community offered by Butler, Chakrabarty, and Nancy. In particular, the teleological formations of the self and community in narrative is exactly the point of contact between proscriptive and critical utopianism. Hence, I organize American novels that engage critical utopian discourse along a temporal axis, highlighting through several sub-arguments along the way how each intervention undermines nostalgic and progressive teleological formations of past, present, or future. Although most critical utopian theory reject linear narrative, teleology, and closure as the representational modes of hegemonic ideology, Ashcroft insists that “meaningful resistance must be framed by the possibility of change even when the idea of change resists teleology” (419). In other words, we need a sense of change for the better which does not depend on a single unitary definition of the good as defined from a single point of view. To match Derrida’s “messianic without messiansim,” Chakrabarty’s “fragments

without a whole,” Butler’s unaccountable selves, and Nancy’s inoperative community, we need, I propose, a framework for progresses without progressivism. This would be something like what Ashcroft describes as the postcolonial literature of globalization, the “representation of a radically hybridized world [that] hovers in an unclosed space between critique and possibility” (420). But such a literature would have to go beyond even the postcolonial (as I think Ashcroft’s gesture toward Salman Rushdie indicates), beyond any categorical division based on existing identities or loyalties. The sheer radicalism of such a move, that is both critical and hopeful at once, is precisely the paradox of utopia as an impossibility.<sup>8</sup>

I conclude this chapter with a comment on Fredric Jameson, who over the course of his career has given us one of the most compelling accounts of utopia in postmodern times, one that stands, I maintain, at the juncture of hope and critique. Jameson’s work on this subject is so substantial, and commentary on it so ubiquitous, that I could easily go on at length reviewing his contribution and what utopian scholars have made of it. In general, I follow Laurence Coupe’s reading of Jameson in continuity with Frye and Bloch, extending a Marxian mythos in which the end of history is also the end of exploitation (2009, 159-163). Jameson is far less blithe than Bloch, and much of his work not only maintains utopia but also marks its limitations and loss in the production systems of late capitalism. These systems, especially the management of consumerism, capture political aspiration in commercial desire, exhaust revolutionary energies for change in the endless activities of exchange, and reduce our ability to imagine a countercultural alternative to our mere fascination with the cultural alteration from one

year's fashions to another's. One of Jameson's early essays speaks specifically to the temporal organization of the later parts of my argument. In "Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can we Imagine the Future," later included in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), Jameson marks the limits of utopia as critique, as it extends from Mannheim through Ricœur and Moylan, which rather simplistically aligns utopia with any counter, resistance, or alternative to the status quo. Arguing that science fiction, fantasy, and utopia mark not the possibility for change but rather its very impossibility, Jameson reminds us that we cannot imagine the real future (i.e. we cannot speculate with accuracy), and therefore that our utopian writings can only be figurative gestures towards what we cannot know or achieve. Moreover, no cultural production can escape being the product of the present circumstance in which it is produced, and "so the effort to imagine utopia ends up betraying the impossibility of doing so." Jameson critiques, for example, the famous anti-National Socialist dystopia of George Orwell for "overstating" its warnings and thus undoing its own logic as predictive speculation (2005, 292); he also seems somewhat disgusted with the ambiguous utopias of Ursula Le Guin (to whom I turn to, emphatically, in part three) for their "counterrevolutionary" anxiety (293, n11).

On first reading, there seems to be no winning with Jameson in this essay: proper romantic utopias are contaminated by their present production, and dystopias and ambiguous or critical utopias are not revolutionary enough. What, however, is ostensibly distressing in this situation I find to be a compelling hope: Jameson argues convincingly that utopia is the corollary of the historical novel (such as *Ivanhoe*), which imagines the present in terms of a narrative of progress. Utopia, on the other hand, does not ally itself



with a narrative of progress but rather calls it into question by imagining the present as the past of a future. The temporality of progress and achievement, as we will see below, holds the key to upsetting essentialist “utopian” notions of individual and community identity as potentially total and stable ideals. It is not surprising that Jameson, a committed Marxist, would be ambivalent about a form that offers *and* denies the workings of a historical dialectic. Ultimately, and here I think Jameson would agree, if utopian discourse does anything useful at all, it gives the present a future and thus resists the tendency to see the present as a solid, unchanging, eternal “what is now and ever shall be.” By opening up the ascribed communities of descent to be supplemented if not replaced by avowed communities of consent, the processes of critical utopian rupture allow for a means for alteration even if they will not establish an end or ideal *per se*. By showing the present as an historically emergent and contingent state of affairs, imaginative literature lays the ground work for any number of kinds of interventions from the reformist to the revolutionary.<sup>9</sup>

## **Chapter 2: Identity, Post- and Inter-**

Utopia, we have seen, has both libertarian and totalitarian or “dystopian” tendencies, and the ambivalence between these poles has fostered a range of speculation from critical theorists. Less attention has been paid directly to utopia by literary theory, which is not the same as saying that literary criticism has ignored the subject. The juncture between critical and literary theories can easily allow, however, for a

transposition of ideas. Thus utopia's liberating and totalizing drives are roughly comparable to the dual forces that Miller and others have described in literature as a transmitter of social normatives, and, at the same time, of "anti-social" alternatives. Fiction, in Miller's thought, can be policing and freeing because it is just that, fiction, because it sets up an idea of the world and also because its world is only an idea, an experimental playground, a space of symbolic action that is empty of the laws of cause and effect that govern real actions. The thought-experiment of fiction, as described by Hans Vaihinger in *The Philosophy of As-If* (1924), is a process of world reduction. That is, the fiction maker strips the world down to a few variables, mainly because the world itself is too complicated to deal with all at once. Thus, world reduction is, according to Vaihinger, a problem-solving strategy.<sup>10</sup> This strategy that streamlines the world to a simpler version of itself is analogous to the utopian tradition that seeks to fix society by dealing with a single controlling idea, principle fault, or original sin. One of the things that is most often oversimplified, in these operations, is the diversity of human identities: there is little difference in utopia in the same way, and probably for the same reason, that there is little change. But nowadays, I argue, we can no longer solve our problems by imaginatively reducing the world in this fashion.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, we will still need fictional as-if worlds, but they will have to be more complicated and messy if they are to be useful. They can no longer be limited to the problems of a single national, gender, religion, class, or ethnic group.

Utopians, those folks we imagine living in utopia, have generally been race-less or class-less. Utopian writers have often been silent about their personal details: at best

we are left with the image of a grey non-identity; at worst, and more often than not, I think, this non-identity silently grants all the usual assumptions that follow when whiteness or Europeanness has been reified as a non-racial or non-ethnic identity. By erasing the difference between people that cause conflict, utopias not only imaginatively end conflict, but they also homogenize human identity along generally supremacist lines. This is not merely a symptom of the identity of most utopian writers but rather a structural defect in utopianism specifically and in existential, pragmatic, or constructivist attitudes generally. These positions, as they have been widely disseminated, are, like the utopian genre itself, dedicated to human freedom and unable to protect that freedom at the same time. Jameson demonstrates this in his “solution” to the question of the content of a Sartrean ethics, which “affirms the Utopian character of all collective experience (including those of fascism and the various racisms) but stresses the requirement of an existential choice of solidarity with a specific concrete group: on this nonformalist view, therefore, the social solidarity must precede the ethicopolitical choice and cannot be deduced from it” (1994, 44). I agree with Jameson that our relationships to others precede our political choices, and this reinforces my focus on ethnicity—ethnicity à la Hall above—because one sense of the word “ethos” is one’s place in the world defined by several “ethical stances” or relationships to one’s surroundings. But I cannot be satisfied with a call to group solidarity that cannot exclude fascism and racism. What we need, I think, are better ideas of group and place, identity and ecology, which do not depend on the homogeneous identity or isolation of the group members. In this chapter,

then, we will look at post-identitarian and post-solidarity concepts for working out a utopianism that is less ambivalent about human suffering.

As should be clear by now, I am using ethnicity as the broadest category of identitarian commitment, and, accordingly, my thinking about post-identitarian community begins with Werner Sollors. But before turning to Sollors in more detail, let me explain why ethnicity, configured here in its narrower ethno-racial sense, may be the most useful way to investigate the broader ethno-identitarian claims of my argument. There is, to be sure, the etymological felicity that the root of ethnicity, *ethnos*, can be taken to mean simply “group.” For the most part, we have thought of these groups called ethnicities in terms of race and culture, and only slightly less frequently in terms of religion or nationality when these categories tend to line up with racial or cultural ones. I will continue, throughout this study, to focus on these categories instead of gender, class, or sexuality. There are, as is well known, good arguments and strong indications that one way to deal with the divisiveness of race, nation, and culture is through the cross-cutting solidarity of gender or class. It is no coincidence that most critical utopian theory is grounded in Marxism and the paradigm of class struggle, and calls for international solidarity among the proletariat can still be heard today. Likewise, as could be most readily argued for the novels in part one, the power of feminist solidarity to cross ethnic lines has been richly demonstrated and productively theorized, and when I write about post-identity, I do touch on gender and class identity as well. I also recognize that, for the most part, the problem of essentialism can take shape in any category of identity we

may use, as Plato used blood and soil, to make the present order of things seem like the natural, inevitable, and only possible order.

To begin with, Sollors's landmark book *Beyond Ethnicity* established, or at least collected and substantiated, a theory of postethnicity in which individuals can belong to groups of *consent* rather than *descent*. As the critic defines these terms,

Descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of "substance" (blood or nature); consent relations describe those of "law" or "marriage." Descent language emphasizes our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and "architects of our fates" to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems. (1986, 6)

In this passage, the past-orientation of descent clearly contrasts with the future-orientation of consent, and it follows that descent language tends toward the ideological maintenance of the status quo, while consent language holds the utopian promise of something new and other than what the past demands. We should not overlook here the possibility of forming a consent community out of the past through what Stuart Hall calls "emergent ethnicities [that have] a relationship to the past, but it is a relationship that is partly through memory, partly through narrative, one that has to be recovered" (1989, 19). It is just such an emergent ethnicity, a mixture of descent and consent, of "cultural recovery" and cultural invention, that we will see in our first novel in part one, Morrison's *A Mercy*.

Without doubt, the existential freedom of the free agent in the consensual scheme of things can be overstated: people may be able to choose their affiliations, but those choices are always shaped, informed, and limited by material circumstances which exist

as effects of past causes. Again, I find Hall's words most instructive on this point, and I agree with him that "there is no way...in which those elements of ethnicity that depend on understanding the past...can be done without" (19). A tendency to play up consent over descent groups does not mean that the past is utterly cast off but only that its grip is loosened somewhat. Whether that claim is too loosened is a matter for debate: Caroline Rody, for example, finds the postethnic school somewhat blind to the felt, lived experience of ethnicity as an inherited identity (2009, 10-11). And, certainly, we may sometimes choose solidarity within a naturalized group identity for strategic, political reasons. Sollors, I think, also demonstrates a self-awareness of the limits of postethnicity when he writes that

Somebody's claim to universalism may easily become somebody else's restriction to particularism, as long as an ideal is identified not with total human striving but with a place on the map or a secular interest. The rhetoric of American exceptionalism, while coming out of utopian hopes for the universal republic of man and for the return of the golden age, may easily subvert its own idealistic origins and speak only for one of the world's superpowers' nationalism—even when it is called transnationalism. (1986, 260)

Thus begin the final paragraphs of his book, which gesture not only beyond America's nationalism but beyond nationalism of any kind and, further, toward a species-wide compassion and cooperation. The problems with getting a sense of "total human striving" has, of course, been complicated by the fact that most human striving is against other humans. We should not be surprised that some, as we shall see especially in part three, turn to green nature here. This is understandable on two counts: first, the "other" of nonhuman nature can be a foil for seeing all the varieties of peoples as a single

biological species; second, the location in the natural landscape of the ecological web of life allows for an ethnicity (placement) based on proximity to difference rather than identity with the same. For the sake of time and focus, I will not fully develop in this study the argument that an even further expansion of the circle of the “we” is needed into the concentric realms beyond the human such as living beings, earthly beings, and even beings that exists at all. But that possibility reoccurs throughout this project, and it is to such a post-human solidarity, I believe, that my novelists are pointing us.

Presently, though, we would be making significant social progress even to imagine all people as humans or all human beings as people, depending on which term we see as the guarantor of rights and social justice. There is, then, clearly a cosmopolitan implication to postethnic communities of choice or, perhaps, proximity. David Hollinger sums it up nicely, when he stipulates that “A postethnic perspective favors voluntary over involuntary affiliations, balances an appreciation for communities of descent within a determination to make room for new communities, and promotes solidarities of wide scope that incorporate people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds,” so much so that this perspective “builds upon a cosmopolitan element...and cuts against ...[a] pluralist” one (1995/2000, 3).<sup>12</sup> The postethnic “builds upon, rather than, rejects the ethnic” (6). I am not sure that such a claim will completely calm our anxieties that a call to postethnicity is just another iteration of cultural genocide, part of an agenda to have nonwhite or non-Christian peoples reject their own ways of life in favor of ostensible civilization or salvation. A thoroughgoing postethnicity will have to require whites,

Anglos, and others to do the same kind of cutting and building as everyone else, and we do not have at present a very good sense of what this would mean.

One might think that Hollinger's postethnic argument, which advocates affinity over identity and choice over destiny, would tend to homogenize all kinds of difference as the same kind of different. In fact, Hollinger remains resolutely in favor of an exceptionalist stance regarding African American struggles, which he defends in both the 2000 and 2005 postscripts to *Postethnic America*.<sup>13</sup> Hollinger's case for exceptionalism appears on the surface to contradict the tenets of postethnicity: if we think that being postethnic means being "past" ethnicity, then there is no sense in continuing to pay special attention to one ethnicity or another. Like Chris Matthews on the occasion of the 2010 State of the Union, we might "forget" that the speaker is black. But, needless to say, Hollinger does not mean at all that people will somehow become nonethnic, forgetting and forsaking the past, nor that we will move past the problems of ethnicity, pushing them out of our minds and silencing urgent calls for meaningful action.

While Hollinger and Sollors present us with the constructedness or "invention" of the particular identities *within* ethnic groups and the ways in which those constructions or inventions continue to shift in the cultural density of postmodern globalization, scholars such as Giles Gunn and Caroline Rody have offered ways to rethink the affiliative ties *between* ethnic groups. In other words, whether the groups are listed on what Hollinger calls the ethno-racial pentad or on some other taxonomy, rethinking our ideas about ethnic infrastructure within groups requires us also to reconsider the interstructures of cooperation among groups. Gunn, for example, has asserted the need for an



interstructure “beyond solidarity,” the title of his 2001 book. He grounds this approach expressly in American pragmatism and features close readings of William James (emergent pragmatism) and Richard Rorty (revisionary pragmatism). Gunn does not fully explicate pragmatism as a reaction to what we might now call a post-Civil War existential crisis in American identity, nor does he account for pragmatism’s continuing popularity as an ongoing result of the perennial problem of American identity determined, in turn, as an affiliative bond across ethnicities. He does contend, however, that pragmatism’s non-essentialist, problem-solving frame of mind lends itself to the struggle for a form of human connection “beyond” the “solidarity” that can be felt within a given group. By solidarity, Gunn indicates loyalty to people we have something in common with; he does not mean that solidarity that has often been the motto for programs and movements reaching across ethnic and national lines. This does not mean that even “transgressive” solidarity has ever necessarily been a call to reach outside one’s own group: even communism’s transnationalism banks on a solidarity among the proletariat. This kind of solidarity, then, may ask us to reconfigure our loyalties, choosing class before nationality, but does not necessarily require us to confront our problems cooperatively alongside people different from ourselves.

Like utopia, the concepts of solidarity and cosmopolitanism have rich and troublesome intellectual histories. The many modifiers that are placed on cosmopolitanism now (“rooted,” “critical,” “patriotic,” and so on) are, as Hollinger reminds us, mostly there to head off objections based on the many early forms of cosmopolitanism that were aligned with repressive regimes (2006, xviii). The Christian-

colonial civilizing mission was, from one angle, underwritten by cosmopolitan ideology that sought to unite the world under one monarch and one god, and there is also, of course, the capitalist cosmopolitanism that would unite or has united the world into one marketplace. Likewise, the modifiers placed on utopia now, with “critical” the most frequent, are there to set a disruptive new version apart from a homogenizing old one. Hollinger heuristically differentiates *solidarity*, “an experience of willed affiliation,” from *community*, “a collectivity of individuals who share a distinguishing trait or practice or place of residence” (xi). Neither of these terms quite line up with Gunn’s exhortation, which we might transcribe here as the call for solidarity beyond community. And yet, if we retain the double sense of ethnicity as a cultural place from which to speak as well as a particular kind of identity (or, better, process of identification), then Hollinger’s dismissal of community as “nothing more than” a shared location will strike us oddly. In the next chapter, as I ask what a postethnic utopia would look like, I will argue by, drawing from the work of Chakrabarty and Nancy, that what we need is precisely a commitment *to* the people with whom we have contact, *for* no more reason than the fact that we have contact with them. We can, thus, make willful affiliations even within unwilled circumstance and have “at least some measure of agency” (xi), which, according to Hollinger, separates solidarity from mere membership.

The call for an active commitment beyond solidarity only with people like oneself does not necessarily have to proceed in a strictly postethnic manner. Caroline Rody’s recent *The Interethnic Imagination*, a work to which my own is closely aligned, critiques Sollors’s “ethnicity school” before proceeding to argue for the kind of interethnic

cooperation that imaginative literature—for Rody, specifically Asian American literature—may foster. I should highlight in passing that Asian American literature is conspicuously absent from the chapters that follow partly because I have little to add to Rody’s commentary. However, I am happy to find a cue in her introduction, where she indicates that the original plan for the *Interethnic Imagination* was broader, encompassing many ethnicities, which is what I attempt to do here. According to Rody, then, Sollors’s model of consent and descent “has tended to treat ethnicity as a mere structure of differences, of boundary-marking without real content” (2009, 10). This erasure of ethnic content is, as she observes, at best unsettling and at worst disempowering politically and culturally. It may well be that the stakes are very different when we make a claim for the inventedness of essential human identity, as broadly considered by anti-humanist poststructuralism, compared to when we stress the inventedness of essential ethnic identity. The demystification of the “human” can be politically liberating because that “human” identity had been coded as white, male, and European through the operations of patriarchal, colonial imperialism. To deconstruct that “humanity” is to open up the category for broader participation or to make it more inclusive. On the other hand, deconstructing ethnic identity may indeed remove grounds for infraethnic solidarity at the very time when it is needed to resist ethnically-framed exploitations or repressions inherent in the systems we have inherited from that same patriarchal and imperial past.

The question, then, is whether we should proceed according to a model of “postethnicity” in which ethnic identity is purely constructed or invented or according to

a model “interethnicity” in which ethnic groups must interact cooperatively for a variety of reasons, among which, as we know all too well, globalized problems that do not respect ethnic lines are some of the most urgent. Whereas postethnicity deconstructs the essential unity inside ethnic identity categories, interethnicity deconstructs the boundaries and barriers between them: these are the two sites that Rody names “roots and passages,” which are “the paths that rooted people nevertheless follow into a syncretic culture” (11). The critique and ultimate rejection of essential fixity on both the infra- and interethnic sites do not seem to me to be mutually exclusive projects: in fact, rather than problematizing each other, each occasions the rupture or crisis to which the other can respond. I do not mean to suggest that this process is easy or simple, but through examining my novelists, I hope to show how the imaginative breakdown both within and between ethnicities is occasioned by and actively responds to both the causes and the effects of globalization. I prefer to name the utopian dimension of such projects “postethnic” (rather than interethnic) because postethnicity has itself been a problem of hegemonic utopianism, which imagines an “age of rest” at “the end of history” chiefly by projecting a homogenized, non-ethnic citizenry. It is the utopianism of non-ethnicity that alarms us about “postethnicity,” and that alarm is principally informed by the memory of white hegemony that operated, and still operates, through the construction of whiteness as a non-ethnic ideal. Thus, keeping “postethnic” at the forefront of my argument, I hope to be mindful of both the utopian promise (of accord) and of the dystopian threat (of homogeneity) that continue to mark this kind of imaginative activity. Such activity is

utopian both in its imaginative dimension and in its attempt to work actively for the betterment of the world.

This future-directedness is also part of Rody's concept of the interethnic imagination. The effect of globalization on ethnic literature, she tells us, is clear: "what we have long thought of as ethnic literature is becoming interethnic literature...the focus of ethnic texts has begun to drift toward the borders of ethnic experience, away from being-ethnic as a problematic in itself, to the condition of being-ethnic amidst a hybrid collective, as part of a 'difficult' but undeniable 'we'" (ix). Moreover, this interethnic imaginary is, in my terms, utopian, since, according to Rody, "literature still works as a space for the exploration of possibilities." Interethnic imaginative writing displays "a strong strain of the visionary, creative reimagining of the potential of intergroup contact and engagement" (xi) in "visions of our emerging future" (xiii). The ability to reach imaginatively across lines of division between self and other has a substantial intellectual pedigree. This is an power of literature importantly different from the power of ideological leverage we addressed in the previous chapter. Here, literature allows for imaginative relations with the other. If utopian literature allows contact with "other" social orders that are alternative and unreal, then "naturalist" literature makes possible, the argument goes, "other" presences in society who are different and really there. The imagination is the key, but the difference between critique and empathy should give us pause, which is why I turn to this distinction before moving on to the next chapter of my introduction.

According to Martha Nussbaum, the empathy of the literary imagination is nothing less than the core of democratic life. The matrix of empathy, readership, and liberal democratic social behavior has been explored in other ways by other theorists across a range of critical temperaments, not only in contemporary works but also in earlier periods. This argument assumes a literary naturalism, literature that describes life in the world as this world “actually exists.” For example, Benedict Anderson’s thesis about readership and imagined community relies on the notion that reading a widely distributed newspaper creates and reifies (“naturalizes”) a perception of an actually existing community (1983/1991, 37-46). On the other hand, Nussbaum’s kind of literary ethics has, at its core, an attention to other people as they exist in the world around us even when that attention is cultivated through the contemplation of imaginary people living imaginary lives. In fact, Nussbaum insists, it is the imagination itself that allows the leap of fancy into thinking that other people might be people at all, not convincing robots (1995, 38).<sup>14</sup> The pertinent distinction, at this point, is between naturalism and the utopian imagination, between writing about how the world *is* or how it *is not*. The ways we value both forms of imagination depend on certain assumptions, detailed in the previous chapter, about how the imaginary world-in-our-heads relates to the actual world-we-live-in. Whereas we have an established framework for understanding the usefulness of naturalism and empathy in dealing with problems of alterity or ethnicity, my argument here is, to my knowledge, the first attempt to connect the utopian rupture of identity and the postethnic revision of utopia in these terms.

### **Chapter 3: What Would a Postethnic Utopia Look Like?**

By arranging the follow parts of this project on a temporal axis, I indicate that the utopian imagination and the problems of ethnicity therein do not lie only in the direction of the future; however, it is clear that, whatever the temporal setting of the novel, writing is directed towards the future insofar as it is always to be read later (e.g. after it is written) and again. This is not to simplify time and identity, as Mannheim so simply paired ideology and utopia to the past and future, respectively. Although I will be arguing against teleology and historicism in its now antiquated sense (the sense of history as inevitable fate, as in Popper's account [1963 ,8]), I never mean to ignore cause-and-effect or the contextualization that Jameson has in mind when he exhorts us to always historicize. Chiefly forms of pragmatism and existentialism, the non-essential philosophies that I rely on to answer the title question above are historical formations that responded to either a crisis in American identity (pragmatism, e.g. William James after the Civil War) or European identity (existentialism, e.g. Jean Paul Sartre after World War II). Both these historical occasions can be seen as refutations of either the liberal democratic utopia or the Enlightenment utopia, both of which are marred with colonial-imperial atrocities. Including the later, poststructuralist and postmodern response to the countercultural shifts of the 1960s, non-essentialist reactions to such crises are, to my mind, always about finding a way forward after the old plans have been painfully, if fortunately, brought to ruin.

Two quick examples might illuminate the future-directedness of broadly defined postmodernism's approach to utopianism. First, in the context of risk and systems theory, we have Anthony Giddens's call for a "utopian realism" (1990, 154), which entails a sober or practical aspirational agenda not unlike Popper's "piecemeal engineering" (1963, 158). Giddens describes a broad, multifaceted set of interconnected social movements that respond to the "growth of totalitarian power, Nuclear conflict or large-scale war, ecological decay or disaster, and the collapse of economic growth mechanisms" (171), which, I might add, draw an analogy to Moylan's "historic bloc of opposition" (1986, 11). According to Giddens, this counterculture alliance proceeds by local politics, global politics, "life politics, or politics of self-actualization," and "emancipatory politics (politics of inequality)" (154-158). These last two politics are engaged with the interethnic and postethnic: "self-actualization" deals with the politics of individual or postethnic identity, and inequality is a characteristic of interethnic strife. Thus, as postmodernity can name both a set of staggering risks and the conditions of possible solutions to them, it becomes clear that we must form a better sense of how these solutions can be arrived at postethnically.

The second example I turn to is Best and Kellner's discussion of "postmodern politics," which they distinguish from "modern politics...informed by strong normative values and utopian visions of a world of universal freedom, equality, and harmony" (1997, 271). Postmodern politics, in their estimation, takes four forms: (1) an anti-politics, (2) "an emphasis on piecemeal reforms and local strategies," (3) a "reconstruct[ion of] Enlightenment values and socialist politics thorough a logic of



contingency and plurality,” or (4) an “identity politics” (271-74). We can see a similarity between Best and Kellner’s third form and Giddens’s “radical modernity,” both of which continue political commitments to social and economic justice but on an anti-foundational basis. Best and Kellner critique identity politics for “ignor[ing] the insights of post-modern theory that identities are multiple and socially constructed and that they need to be reconstructed in an emancipatory, autonomous, and self-affirming fashion,” which is why this politics may be seen as “seek[ing] to advance the interest of a single specific group” (274). It is specifically my claim, in this work, that we can no longer favor the interests of people like ourselves when we set about the problem-solving work of critical utopia. My contention is not simply that we should not be parochial but goes further by arguing that the globalized problems we now confront make it increasingly unthinkable to be so. The final postmodern turn, Best and Kellner tell us, is both to the political and to the future: “The postmodern adventure... involves a mapping of this new space-time continuum, situating us at the current historical crossroads where we can explore our options and suggest some new directions for the beleaguered forms of life on this planet” (281). Yet again new forms of temporality and ecology—“forms of life on this planet”—emerge from the analysis of postmodernity as the framework *par excellence* for cooperative problem solving. Best and Kellner’s final invocation draws our attention to the need for a situated, rhetorical postethnic utopianism wherever political decisions are made, which is now everywhere and not only at the king’s court, as was the case when More imagined the prospect of Hythoday as a kind of utopian jester.

To sum up, this study is positioned at the intersection of ethnic and utopian studies in the context of the American novel at the end of and after the Cold War, when it becomes powerfully and specifically apparent that the American idea of an intentionally created nation of immigrants has inscribed both topics deeply in this nation's culture and, as we shall see, in its literature. The Cold War stalemate, in some ways a clash of capitalist and soviet utopianism, configured our one planet as three worlds. The ending of this period in history, which coincides with the consolidation of postmodern and postcolonial cultural transformation, occasioned a widespread re-theorization of previous concepts and practices of community, nationalism, and utopianism. With so many gestures to the globality of the stakes at hand, then, it may seem strange to circumscribe my argument within American fiction; certainly, postethnic utopianism can be a useful angle on other national or regional cultures, and it could not exist in a world that had not gone global. But it seems to me—and I follow Hollinger here—that the US remains an important site where these issues are being worked out in unique and innovative ways, worthy of a dedicated and focused attention. For my own argument, this national context is apt because a consubstantial utopianism, on the one hand, and a multiplicity of ethnic ingredients, on the other, have always been inscribed in America's cultural DNA.

In this third and final chapter of my introduction, I turn to several contemporary philosophers, rather marginally associated with utopia or ethnicity studies, for help in outlining what a postethnic utopia might be. My readings here come from both sides of the Atlantic, drawing on theories informed by existentialism and pragmatism. What unites these approaches is a commitment to materialism or non-essentialism. Generally

speaking, I find these approaches useful because they allow us to think hopefully about community and the future yet without recourse to some metaphysical identity or destiny. The philosophical utopianism that I attributed to Plato above is concerned with the discovery of a true order of society, where by *true* we mean harmony with humankind's essential inner nature or the foundationally true nature of the world. The rhetorical utopianism that I attributed to More, on the other hand, is characterized by its use the utopian trope to achieve a better social order than the one immediately at hand. It takes little or no interest in the question of true identity or destiny, but rather focuses on material well being. In this materialism or non-essentialism, it is a pragmatic or existential strategy. In the following section, I outline a way of rethinking, along these lines, our ideas about utopia and community, as well as the imbedded issues of individual and group identity. Ultimately, as we shall see, literature and imaginative interaction now emerge as vital to the articulation of postethnic utopia.

By starting with existentialist accounts of writing as an exchange of individually experienced worlds, we can begin to see the importance of free yet conjoined individuals to the utopian imagination. The most useful theoretical model, in this respect, comes from the work of Elaine Scarry, influenced explicitly by the existentialist humanism of Jean-Paul Sartre. In "Why Write?" Sartre argues that writing is a means by which people share their worlds. The act of reading and writing, he says, is an act of generously accepting another person's description of the world, of opening our perceptions to the other's description. Thus writers and readers exchange experiential worlds, each surrendering their own cognition of the world to the articulated perceptions and

interpretation of other people's experiences. This surrender must be freely offered and taken and hence the act of writing becomes inextricably bound up with human freedom and dignity. Scarry follows this line of argument, explaining that reading is, fundamentally, "imagining under authorial instruction" (1995). The reader imagines the world as the writer directs her to do so. That our world exists for us through the articulation of our perceptions and experiences is a major assumption of Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985). The most famous part of her argument is the explication of how the infliction of pain, as in torture, is an effective political coercion because pain interrupts perception, cognition, and articulation of the world. But for my project the most pertinent part of Scarry's work is her theory of the artifact, where she expands on the work of Sartre by suggesting that all human-made objects, including concepts such as "god," function as a kind of intervention *in* the world. For Sartre, writing and reading allow individuals to shape the world together by negotiating their perceptions of the world. For Scarry, artifacts, including the artifacts of writing, are actually part of the world itself. Moreover, they are limited and, in Popper's words, piecemeal engineering solutions rather than utopian ones. Like Popper, Scarry sees the prospect for world-change as one that proceeds incrementally, by accretion. She distinguishes the sweeping imagination and material artifaction by relative small-scale of the later:

While imagining may entail a revolution in the entire order of things, the eclipse of the given by a total reinvention of the world, an artifact (a relocated piece of coal, a sentence, a cup, a piece of lace) is a fragment of world alteration. Imagining a city, the human being "makes" a house; imagining a political utopia, he or she instead helps to build a country; imagining the elimination of suffering from the world, the person instead nurses a friend back to health. (1985, 171)

Thus ostensibly metaphysical qualities are given physical existence in artifacts that are imaginative, counterfactual wishes made material and therefore more durable than ephemeral speech acts. Above, in the chapter on utopia and ideology, we saw that literary narrative is lever for both ideological reproduction and mutation. Following Scarry, though, we can say that literary artifacts (distinguished, perhaps, from literary texts) also transmit compassion and reassurance. The fragmentation and specificity of artifacts as the transmitters of inscribed humanity hint at what will become the running theme of this chapter, which is to say that, in order to forego totalitarian utopian and essentialist identity, we must also forego wholeness or permanence through and through.

Scarry's advance over Sartre, I believe, differs strongly from description of literature as a mirror that teaches empathy, a key assumption in Nussbaum's praise of naturalism. Rather than instructing or cultivating empathy, in Scarry's model literature actually *is* empathetic. It is, more to my point here, an empathetic *intervention*. Scarry describes human-made artifacts in terms of their maker's sentience, in most cases their comprehension of human suffering. The chair-maker understands the body's need for rest and support; the coat-maker, its need for warmth. This empathy is made material in the artifacts themselves. Scarry includes "a poem" among the list of such artifacts but does not elaborate on how literary artifacts might function differently than material ones like chairs and coats. She does, however, describe all such artifacts, including complex abstract creations like the findings in a civil court case as containing a "counterfactual wish." The chair is a wish to not-be-tired; the coat a wish to not-be-cold; the civil settlement an impossible wish that some calamity did-not-happen. In this way, all

artifacts are an attempt to make the world a better place, and in this sense part of a utopian endeavor. Insofar as writing is a way to share how we each see the world, we might conclude, then, following Sartre and Scarry, that novels represent a counterfactual wish that the reader would see the world a different way.

Let us take a closer look at the materiality of counterfactual wishes, which are closely related to Althusser's second thesis, on the material transmission of ideology, and which are also quasi-synonymous to Popper's "'world 3'...the objective productions of the human mind...such as books, symphonies, works of sculpture, shoes, aeroplanes, computers" (1992, 8). For Scarry, the creation of objects (imaginatively or materially) constitutes a movement away from pain because bodily pain is a state in which the objects of perception disappear: in terms of intentional consciousness, pain and the imagination are "each other's missing intentional counterpart" (1985, 161-62, 169). The imagination can be occasioned by pain or at least discomfort: the hungry man imagines and then seeks out a meal; the cold woman designs and then creates a coat. When this imagined object is made into durable artifact like a coat, the counterfactual wish to not-be-cold becomes sharable. Making a coat for someone else to wear is an act of wishing that another would not-be-cold, and thus constitutes an act of compassion (298-90). Like all compassion, this act is based on an imaginative empathy, a sense of what it is like to be cold and a feeling that the relief of another's suffering is important for much the same reasons that one's own relief from suffering matters. Thus the making of artifacts is the making of a better world e.g., one in which people are not cold because they have coats. As artifacts accumulate, the counterfactual wishes can become more fine-grained (171):

having wished to produce manuscripts more quickly and reliably than scribal transcription, we invented movable type; now we are inventing artifacts like email and twitter to communicate ever more automatically and rapidly. For Scarry, the action of an artificer is the act of encoding a compassionate sentence into an object. Art responds to a need, and in this way, it is responsible. Such a theory of literature applies to naturalism and utopianism alike, but we must stipulate at the beginning that not all novels engage the imagination in the same way. Within the literary imagination, I propose that we distinguish, heuristically, the imaginative projects of naturalism from those of utopianism. The difference is one of kind as well as degree. But before I can specify what utopian literature does differently, we need to consider this distinction more critically and along with it just what “naturalism” means.

Both in terms of the canon and in terms of marketplace, the literary mainstream tends to be governed at least ostensibly by the hallmarks of literary realism. Because the realist-style presentation of nonreal subjects is widely considered a criterion for excellence in fantasy writing, for my discussion, I propose, a more useful term would be literary naturalism. When a contemporary work is called “a novel,” we generally assume it is a work of literary naturalism. The obviousness of this association is not annulled by the substantial presence of genre fiction: the fact that mainstream literature often borrows from “science fiction” or “the fairy tale” only reifies the assumption of naturalism as its basic form. Very often, writers and critics view these borrowings through the lens of postmodern, intertextual irony. When writers take on the tropes of nonmimetic or “unnatural” genre fiction, the assumption goes, they do so in order to continue exploring

the concerns of naturalism in different terms. The importance of these concerns is a key tenant in the conventional apology for the literary imagination, and many apologists do craft their defense in terms of what literature brings to our attention. People are generally in favor of literature if it creates beneficial forms of attention; we are less clearly affirmative of literature that may be trivial, distracting, or merely decorative. To return this question to the difference between utopian and naturalist imaginations, we can ask if the former pays a different kind of attention than the latter. I believe that Scarry's model of the literary artifact shows us that it does, and that this other kind of attention focuses on (1) changing the world, i.e. making counterfactual wishes come true, and (2) sharing compassionate sentience with others. Artifacts are, then, both utopian and communicable and mark the insistence that utopia be the product of multiple, recursive articulations—even, I would add, negotiations—rather than the grand scheme of a philosopher king. Most notably, these artifacts that constitute a major portion of the human world – Popper's "world 3"—are no longer confined, if they ever were, to any one social position, cultural group, or ethnicity. The exchanges and circulations, borrowings, parodies, appropriations, and rewritings, so ubiquitous in contemporary culture, condition us to share the world in a less proscriptive, more postethnic way. The anonymity of information access in the age of the Internet undoubtedly has something to do with this. But even without analyzing the new postethnic patterns of cultural production and exchange, we can still observe everyday that the artifacts and counterfactual wishes that materially create a human world, a social space for the activities that constitute a community, do so increasingly without regard to keeping particular versions of the



human world separate from each other. This common space, the space of community, must be reevaluated.

Theorizing postethnic utopia as a new form of community problem-solving leads us to the neo-communitarian theory of Nancy's inoperative community. "For it is a thinking" of community, Nancy tells us, that we find in Marx, and "not merely an idyllic narrative ready to be transformed into a future utopia" (1991, 74). Inoperative, *désœuvrée*, does not mean an unworking community, i.e. dysfunctional or lazy or unworkable, but rather a community-without-a-work, without an grand *oeuvre* to which it is dedicated and by which it is constituted. The community is not itself an artifact wrought by some transcendental artificer, whether it be God, human nature, or dialectical materialism; this community does not insist the individual should be subsumed into the group through a process of communion but rather that individuals communicate with each other. Nancy describes "the modern experience of community as neither a work to be produced, nor a lost communion, but rather as space itself, and the spacing of the experience of the outside, of the outside-the-self" (19). Rather than having a work, a metaphysical project that we might call utopia, community for Nancy is a spacing of the singular beings who compose it. "Singular being" is his phrase for what we used to call "the individual" or even "the subject," and, rather than an obfuscation, I find it especially helpful in clarifying the ineffable boundary that marks each of us as "one" even though we are neither indivisible or alone.

Nancy rejects utopian community both in its nostalgic and its apocalyptic sense. In a play on community, communion, and communication, Nancy is directly critiquing

the “worker’s paradise” of utopian Marxism (and we should recall at this point that Bloch argues most persuasively that Marxism is a utopian vision):

Communism—as, for example, in the generous exuberance that will not let Marx conclude without pointing to a reign of freedom, one beyond the collective regulation of necessity, in which surplus work would no longer be an exploitative *work*, but rather art and invention—communicates with an extremity of play, of sovereignty, even of ecstasy from which the individual as such remains definitely removed. (7)

A key characteristic of the inoperative community, then, is the processes of articulation among singular beings, each at the edge of its own singular experience or position.

Articulation here has the double sense of an articulation of parts and the speech-act itself (76). Whether linguistically or through material artifacts, such exchanges take place where the boundaries of singular beings meet, at the limit of my world where it touches the limit of your world. “The call that convokes us...at this limit,” according to Nancy, “can be named, for want of a better term, writing, or literature” (71).

This contingent<sup>15</sup> contact, abetted by writing or something that functions like writing, such as Scarry’s artifacts, “does not pass into a common space... only the limit is common, and the limit is not a place, but the sharing of places, their spacing” (73). This spatial location of limited beings in proximity to one another grounds community in the common (but unsharable) fact of human morality through the realization of each singular being’s own limits grasped at the moment when that being fails, can go no further, its limit marked by the limit of another who is outside: “it is the presentation of the finitude and the irredeemable excess that make up finite being: its death, but also its birth, and only the community can present me my birth, and along with it the impossibility of my

reliving it” (15). This encounter with others in community “is not a communion that fuses the *egos* into an *Ego* or a higher *We*. It is the community of others. The genuine community of mortal beings...” (15). Thus community is, at its core, the recognition of oneself as a limited being among other limited beings.

The consciousness of oneself as a singular being in communication with others, Nancy tells us, “is ecstasy: which is to say that such a consciousness is never mine, but to the contrary, I only have it in and through community” (19). This insight could occasion wide-ranging associations to other paradigms: to language as a community of signs, each having its meaning only in difference to the others; to Buddhist ideas of “dependant arising” in which each existence disappears into the existences that frame and constitute it; or, again, to the South African tribal wisdom of *ubuntu*, the vision of self in which “I am because we are.” I will have occasions to return to these diverse groups of thought—the poststructuralist, the Buddhist, the tribal—in passing. For now, I would propose that what Nancy calls a literature, the articulation of a community, we may understand in the sense of general communication or imaginative exchange. The contact with others that literature marks and facilitates creates a community, and the literary artifact’s durability and sharability gives the community some continuity and intergenerational direction forward in time. But there is no grand scheme, master plan, or invisible hand guiding this movement in a teleological story of progress. As the philosopher states, “The communication that takes place on this limit... demands that way of destining ourselves in common that we call politics, that way of opening community to itself, rather than to a destiny or to a future” (80). This is the temporal-spatial framework that informs the

structure of the parts that follow this chapter. We see a transformation of not only past and future, but also present spatial configurations. Before proceed to the novels, there is, however, something more to be said about the consequences for Nancy's "limit" and the encounters with, at, or on it. We need to better understand how a community of singular beings can work together without being an organized whole; and we need to better understand the ethical upshot of encountering ourselves as limited, as beings without a sustaining mytho-identity. To this end, I conclude my introduction with two theorists who have made important contributions toward understanding the ethical implications of a community notion that rules out any sense of the interpersonal or intrapersonal whole.

Nancy's community is a *spacing* of singular beings, and this recalls, to my mind, Chakrabarty's "two ways of relating to difference: proximity and identity." These concepts arrive in the final chapter of *Habitations of Modernity*, which the writer describes as a "a plea to keep in view—even as we write politically and in search of a more just world—the dilemmas of what Hannah Arendt once sagaciously called 'the human condition'" (2002, xxiv). Thus the turn is both to the future and to the broadest possible thinking of human suffering, which is to my mind also the direction in which postethnic utopia is headed. In his final chapter, Chakrabarty defines identity as the process by which "difference is either congealed or concealed...frozen, fixed or... erased by some claim of being identical of the same." Such is the mode of what Nancy would call an operative community, in which individuals find identity through communion, being-one, in a common work. Proximity, however, is 'the opposite mode, one of relating to difference in which (historical and contingent) difference is neither reified nor

erased but negotiated” (140). The two things that proximity does not do are important: difference is not reified, as in the noble lie, nor is it erased as in the communion of selfsame solidarity. Rather than these solutions, “the practice of proximity” must be “the practice of relating to historical and contingent difference by acknowledging and negotiating it” (147). I propose that a model of proximity as a practice gestures in the same direction as Ashcroft’s description of critical utopianism as a process rather than product. Chakrabarty is very specific in rejecting “utopian blueprints of social orders from which the evil of violence will be eternally banished” (143). Instead of sweeping final solutions, the endeavor to mitigate violence is an ongoing negotiation requiring, in part, that we “acknowledg[e] different kinds of difference, and even inequalities and equalities, without letting them give offense” (148). In terms of critical intervention, the teleology of cause and effect must give way to a broader narrative description because “purely political and sociological histories often lose themselves in the impulse of causal analysis and, thus, in the designs of utopian social engineering” (148). In lieu of recapitulating grand historical accounts, we must pay attention instead to the everyday negotiations of differences. To my mind, this ceaseless task has an ascribed feminized character, calling to mind the work of the housekeeper who maintains the home through everyday chores that are never finished. But even though there is no final analysis or end to the negotiations, the work of the housekeeper is still one of judgment and discernment.

When we do change our thinking on wholeness and fragmentation, we must also reevaluate our estimations of surety and frailty, permanence and the need for maintenance. Neighborly proximity requires constant attentiveness because, as

Chakrabarty concludes, “the explorations of history and memory show that only a capacity for a humanist critique can create the ethical moment in our narratives and offer, not a guarantee against the prejudice that kills, but an antidote with which to fight it” (148). This lack of a guarantee is not the same thing as a lack of hope, although Chakrabarty is clearly calling on critical rather than blithely hopeful kinds of discursive work. What is most valuable here, for me, is the notion that a community comprised of proximate fragments can endeavor towards the good and better, and, further, that such endeavors can be the work of the housekeeper rather than the architect. What is radical here is the idea that such fragments do not add up to a whole: they are not the remains of a whole that has been smashed, nor are they the pieces that will someday be reunited.

Here I must switch to the opening chapters of *Habitations of Modernity*, where Chakrabarty proposes this thinking of the fragment. Having built upon the alignment between unification, rationality, and history on the one hand, and fragmentation, irrationality, and memory on the other, Chakrabarty asks

What would happen to our political imagination if we did not consider the state of being fragmentary and episodic as merely disabling? If a totalizing mode of thinking is needed for us to imagine the state theoretically, what kind of political imagination and institutions could sustain themselves on the basis of a thought that joyously embraced the idea of the fragment? If the statist idea of the political defined the mainstream of political thought, then here may be an alternative conceptual pole to it: an idea of the political that did not require us to imagine totalities. (35-36)

Later, this fragmentation takes on a temporal structure: “But the past,” he writes, “also comes to me in ways I cannot see or figure out—or can see or figure out only retrospectively.” With the lack of a total (unfragmented, all-seeing) theory, he says, “I

can live only practically, the future ceasing to exist as an object of analytic consideration (while it can always be the subject of poetic utterance)” (46). My sense throughout is that this practical living—the daily routine of our allegorical housekeeper—is best grounded in non-metaphysical ways, and I find some confirmation of this in Chakrabarty’s assertion that “to live with a limited sense of autonomy is to accept pragmatism as a principle of living” (47). He does not, of course, mean the American philosophical school strictly speaking, but rather the clear-headed, ad-hoc problem solving that that school claims as its purpose.

To pragmatically solve the kinds of global problems that we face now—postmodernly as well as postcolonially—requires the praxis of proximity, of cooperation with others nearby, our neighbors. Our problems are not ours alone, and so neither can be the solutions. Both are pieces of bigger puzzles and, given this all-embracing fragmentation, “to open ourselves to such disruptive histories would require us seriously to grant our social life a constant lack of transparency with regard to any one particular way of thinking about it” (37). Assuming for a moment that “totality” would be the “way to go,” no one, by act of reason or otherwise, can have a total vision, through and through all of the human world. Our acts of sociopolitical imagination—what some, including myself, call our utopias—can no longer be written for the good of only one position alone. We need, now, as many eyes as we can get on our problems. But the limits here, the opacities, are not only between particular ways of thinking about the world but also within each singular one of us, as our personal histories are disrupted and come to us in ways we cannot see or figure out except retrospectively. The fragmentation of ourselves

and our communities never was and never will be repaired, because it is not the sign of anything broken to begin with. Thus an unthinking of any originary or future wholeness on the level of the community balances, in my thinking, the absence of an originary self or complete and exhaustive narrative of self.

Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* is invaluable at this point, for it gives us not only a description of the loss of a total internal narrative but also its consequences for ethics. I might be faulted here for evoking a theorist best known for her work on performative gender identity, rather than a more obvious choice such as Stuart Hall, to whom I have referred above. However, *Giving an Account of Oneself* confronts the problem of selfhood as identity directly, indeed existentially, without specific reference of gender or racial identities per se. This work, to my mind, richly compliments Nancy's literature of the inoperative community with an ethics of the unaccountable self. Nancy himself indicates, in the phrase "singular being," that the human being and the human self can be differentiated: this opens up the opportunity for us, with Butler, to insist that the self is no more an essential work than is the community as a whole. The without-an-oeuvre of the community is symmetrical with the without-a-self of the individual or singular being, which also implies, of course, that *oeuvre* and *self* here are being contested as metaphysical or essential totalities. In a passage that strongly parallels Nancy's writing, Butler places the recognition of being-a-self at the limit of experience: "But I become this self only through an ec-static movement, one that moves me outside of myself into a sphere in which I am dispossessed of myself and constituted as a subject at the same time" (2005, 115). While Nancy offers us a model of community



as the articulation of singular beings, Butler gives us a notion of the singular self that in its unaccountability fosters a compassionate ethics.

On this ground, she further argues that such an ethics is based on the self's inability to fully know or account for its own being insofar as this account must be given in language. Because the origins of the self precede the reflexive capacity acquired through language, our being exceeds our narrative reach and we can never fully explain how we came to be. The recognition of this limit within ourselves requires "a certain patience with others that would suspend the demand that they be self-same at every moment. Suspending [this] demand... counter(s) a certain ethical violence" that insists people remain who they are ascribed to be at all times (2005, 42). Because this position is "based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves" (41), Butler's ethics appears to echo Bloch's "inscrutable we-problem," in which "we have no organ for the I or the We; rather, we are located in our own blind spot, in the darkness of the lived moment." It is out of this darkness, he tells us, that hope arrives (1964, 200-01). Thus, the utopian notion of a romantically whole and self-actualizing identity, which an individual romantic quest might "discover" for an individual or a civilization's progressive enlightenment might "achieve" for a group, disappears into the fog of countless individual, irrecoverable infancies. Butler thus connects the unrecoverable foundational experiences of infancy with Foucault's non-essentialist anti-humanism: "As a result," of the absence of rationality at the dawn of individual lives, she writes, "we cannot talk about a golden day in which there was reason and then a set of events or historical shifts that plunged us into irrationalism" (119). A requirement to give *one*

exhaustive narrative rationalization denies the ways in which life exceed rationality, and thus the demand for a particular account “will foreclose others, so that one will become knowable to oneself only within the terms of a given rationality, historically conditioned, leaving open and unaddressed what other ways there may have been, or may well be, in the course of history” (120). Butler takes away the “golden age” and the utopian aspiration to a perfectly rational, self-asserting, subject; she replaces it with the open-ended utopia of “may have been, or may well be,” the utopianism of alternatives to the world as it has been received or arrived at.

To complete her argument, Butler turns to *parrhesia*, the rhetorical trope of indecorous speaking. The indecorousness, or non-mimesis, of utopian writing will be, as we shall note, important in configuring literature’s role in promoting the new forms of utopia, community, and self that I have outlined here. Butler’s return to the speech act—the accounting of oneself and the yielding to the interlocutive demands of the other—brings her again to the ineffable boundary of what Nancy calls the singular being: Nancy’s articulation and Butler’s accounting both insist that an ethical community depends upon the communication among its constituent members, that both the community and its members are constituted by this communication. Literary artifacts conduct such communication through symbolic action, and it is the disjunction of the symbol or the image from the real referent that gives literature its ideological leverage. The images and symbols that circulate among the singular beings in community do not add up to a whole anymore than any individual being can fully account for its own origins or identity apart from the accounts of the other beings that surround it. This gap

or loss of the whole—of foundations or essences—represents both a rejection of one form of utopianism and the inauguration of another. It would be the utopianism of an inoperative community that exists in the impossibility of utopia itself.

To rethink utopia postethnically, then, I have redescribed the material transmission of culture to include not only ideological reproduction by also the accumulation of compassionate counterfactual wishes. Further, I have resisted the notion that this accumulation ever adds up to a total or whole that we could then manage on a totalist—let alone totalitarian—basis. I have suggested instead that community is constituted by a myriad of exchanges, of material and linguistic artifacts such as literature, which do not form a grand narrative or total work. Yet, for one thing, I have rethought this fragmented community not as fallen from or destined to wholeness; for another, I have insisted that rethinking fragmentation as a natural state of affairs calls us to a renewed commitment to negotiation and cooperation, patience and generosity, as well as pragmatic problem-solving. This is not, I also stress, an acceptance of a lack or shortcoming of the world or of others. It is rather a self-reflexive recognition of our own limited location as living beings. “An ability to affirm what is contingent and incoherent in oneself,” Butler tells us, “may allow one to affirm others who may or may not ‘mirror’ one’s own constitution” (41). To be sure, we do not even have to think that others are contingent or fragmented in the same way that we ourselves are. In this paradigm, the hope of a shared world is open to any other being, whose similarity or identity to oneself is simply not part of the call to participation, although specific differences will obviously make specific interactions easier or more difficult on a case-by-case basis.

The insights and models that I have drawn from in this chapter are not, of themselves, theories of utopias. The closest on this count would be Scarry; the furthest may be Chakrabarty, who is very careful to reject utopian social engineering, which he rightly associates with colonization. Nancy, of course, is writing in the wake of communism and its twentieth-century utopia; his occasion is much the same as Derrida's in *Specters of Marx*, that is, the end of the Soviet Union. This ending of one "clash of utopias" is also, I submit, the postethnic occasion. To stop being first, second, or third world peoples is another kind of postethnic move. No doubt, we still must think carefully through the past to see its hidden architecture, even when we have no wish to erect new edifices on its ruined foundations. Those foundations—of Platonic Idealism, of rationality, total management, stable identity, and so forth—will do us little good now. This does not mean that we do not need a location, a context, a past from which to speak. Being postethnic does not entail being totally, abysmally dislocated and thus silenced. It implies that we have to keep moving, of necessity, and so we might as well learn how to run. The image of a tennis player comes to mind: she runs, plants her feet, strikes the ball, and then runs again—it is, indeed, a running game. The moment of fixity that allows her to execute a discursive interaction is only a moment, a strategy in time not entirely of her own choosing yet also not out of her control. So too, as we keep moving through an increasingly fast and crowded world, we have to know when and where to plant our feet, to "get in the position." It is on this note that I conclude my introduction; in part one, we will see three examples of the postethnic utopian imagination that positions itself, contingently and strategically, in the malleable, avowable past.

## PART 1 / ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES

### **Inevitability and Contingency**

Whether deliberate propaganda such as Plato's Myth of Blood and Soil or the "genuine" elements of cultural traditions, origin myths each belong to a particular ethno-religious group. That is, origin mythology tends to define communities of belief rather than gender or class identity groups, although such myths often set out to explain, by naturalizing, gender and class systems. With the exception of evolutionary theory (as a secular origin story), most origin myths explicate only the creation of people "like us" or include, as an episode in the myth cycle, the division of an originary people into the various peoples scattered about the earth.<sup>1</sup> Novelists who imagine alternative origins, whether mythical or historical, are not only writing one story over and against another, but also they have something to say about the storifying of the past itself. A teleological mindset will tell us that the past is either (1) a mythical narrative that explains the present, or (2) a historicist dialectic that inevitably leads to the present. In this second case, the historicist assumes that because the past has produced the present, it *must* have done so. This paradigm reifies the present as the *inevitable* result of the past. We tend to feel this in our everyday lives, for example if we think our parents' union inevitably produced ourselves, ignoring the countless other individuals that could have been born in our stead. Up until very recently, these myths and histories have been routinely particular and ethnocentric: creation is the story of how *our* tribe came to be; history is the story of

*our* nation struggling to be born. In either case, there is a tendency to see the coming into being of the present world only in terms of one particular people. The singularity of this kind of inhabitant goes along with the assumption that the present is the natural product of the past, whether the means of production is the magical will of a narrating god or the mechanical outcome of a history. The novelists in the following chapters see the past, and the act of imagining the past, in non-teleological and hence postethnic terms. These writers present the foregone process of becoming-present as the workings of contingency and coincidence in world that always has been and always will be occupied by many kinds of mutually othered peoples.

Although Mannheim would name our image of the past an ideology, the utopian imagination also encompasses the past, usually with nostalgia, albeit under the names of the *arcadian* and the *pastoral*. Leveraging a kind of homesickness, utopian past-writing lifts up supposedly traditional or foundational social orders against the dilapidations of the present, and so they are broadly conservative rather than progressive. Romanticizing a prelapsarian otherness by opposing the rural to the urban and the agrarian to the technological, pastorals ostensibly ameliorate present suffering by remembering or reclaiming a more authentic or less corrupt, less complicated and fragmented life that once was. What appears on the surface as a lost or distant otherness functions as a call for cohesion to an ideal unity, the way people ought to be. Traditionally, this ideal lost state of being is imagined from an ethnically precise point of view but projected broadly onto all humanity. Nostalgic utopianism is then the least utopian utopianism, insofar as it implies an ideology resistant to differential change in favor of recapitulating unitary

traditional achievements and values.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, we can still include this form in the broadly change-obsessed discourse because conservatism advocates a break from or rupture of the status quo, albeit in the form of a return to the old rather than the innovation of the new.

In part one, I find evidence for a different kind of past-writing in selected novels by Morrison, Roth, and Silko. In doing so I have unintentionally recreated the same lineup of authors who Naomi Rand discusses in her article “Surviving What Haunts You” (1995). Yet Rand’s reading of these imaginative pasts as survival narratives is very different from my own reading of them as reconfigurations of the past along the lines of postethnic or inoperative community. Rand is helpful in spelling out the connection between claiming a group history and establishing an individual identity: “With an acknowledgment of a particular cultural heritage comes a delineation, an enforcement of individuation which is finally at odds with the desire for homogeneity and acceptance that might be called on of the basic American myths” (21). With reference to Sollors’s categories of descent and consent, Rand claims that “these writers must struggle with their pasts as with their demons” partly because they are haunted by “the vision of a truly ‘New World’ where past and present are unable to coexist amiably” (22). There can be no doubt that the past troubles American identity and the identities of Americans, when, to take one example, some are the descendents of slaves and some the descendents of slave owners. (Moreover, let us not forget, more and more are descendents of both). I agree with Rand that Morrison, Silko, and Roth insist, in these novels, that America’s past is the schizophrenic past of both victimizer and victim. Because of this persistent,

haunting past, these novelists make use of ghosts and memories to indicate the “still ongoing battle between possible and impossible versions of the world” (30). Ghosts in particular, for these authors, “serve as a link between the visible and invisible, between guilt and freedom from guilt,” which ultimately disallow any forgetting of the past. Rand underlines this point when she observes that

As Americans, we are taught that we can free ourselves, can cut the ties that bind us to the past, but the line between the visible and the invisible is not as tenuous as we would like to believe. For Morrison, Roth, and Silko, the act of separation must entail a resuscitation, and even a resurrection, perhaps because those who do not study history are condemned to repeat it. (31)

This final platitude, I think, indicates the horizon of Rand’s argument. There is here a general rejection of the existential freedom from the past that many have seen, rightly, as a tool of domination, severing oppressed people from their “roots” in a differential identity that can be an important source of strength. But what is going on in these novels, I claim, is more complicated than a mere imperative to “never forget.” There is a particular kind of active memory—what in Morrison we name rememory—that makes the relationship to the past and the present more flexible than Rand would indicate. This flexibility comes from a rethinking of the past as not the history of *either* the dominating *or* the dominated group, but rather as the shared history of both. Morrison, Roth and Silko not only speak to what haunts African Americans, Jewish Americans, and Native Americans separately, but also what haunts these groups along with Anglo Americans, collectively or communally. In the following chapters, we will see that a rethinking of the past does not only mean a rethinking of, say, the African American past for the



African American community, but also a rethinking of the interethnic past for the postethnic community.

One of my premises here is that invoking the past to regulate present behavior affects not only “ethnic” writers, but also ostensibly nonethnic, i.e. white, American writers as well. The call to remember the American dead—usually with no acknowledgment of the ethnic diversity among the dead, and hence a de-ethnicizing or whitening of them—continues to be the principal lever of patriotic quietism. That is, criticisms of the American social order can and have often been silenced by the accusation of being disloyal because they disrespect what so many have died for. This invocation of the fallen soldier—the dead, who is most rhetorically persuasive when he is “unknown” and thus a perfect cipher for the national message—consolidates national identity through a process that Anderson calls the “reassurance of fratricide” (1991,199). Anderson attributes this phenomenon to the operations of first-generation nationalism, but it clearly goes on even in older nations in subsequent generations. If anything, its rhetorical advantage, like the number of the dead themselves, continues to increase. Anderson explains, convincingly, that when nationalists tell the history of a singular national consciousness “awakening” from sleep (thus having a past, even though newly active), they need a way to speak from the pre-conscious past. To answer this need, Michelet and others innovated a trope of “speaking for the dead,” by which they could, “with poignant authority, say what [the dead] ‘really’ meant and ‘really’ wanted” (198). What the veniloquized dead wanted, it comes as no surprise, was to succeed at supreme personal sacrifice in founding the “awakened” nation, whichever one it may be. Thus

uncritical love and blind duty are a debt owed to the dead, to the nation as part of a historical narrative, the nation that appears to the newly awakened as already decided and, indeed, inevitable. What is at stake, then, are the ways in which historical narratives create the impression of a monoethnic teleological sequence that demands our loyalty to the status quo. When we answer the question, “how did we get here?” with any given narrative, we imply that the end of the story (the present-day “we”) is the intended or natural conclusion of that narrative. The political uses of such teleology are clear: when certain conditions are assumed to be inevitable, any resistance to those conditions seems impossible or unwise.

However, the narrative of the dead need not always be a national or ethnically expunged narrative, a story of the death of faceless individuals in service to the birth of a nation (to use a loaded phrase). Writers of the dead or the unreal—in other words, writers of fictions—can articulate alternative visions, revisions in fact, to the secular myths of the nation. The motivation to do, I propose, would have to entail likewise revisions to ethnic identity and community. That is, if the secular history of nationalism means to provide a national identity, then whatever alternative or revisionary past one offers up would also have to answer the same need. My assumption here is that alternatives are generally a different solution to roughly the same problem, even when the solution involves radically revising our notions of what the problem is or is not. The novelists in part one, I argue, resist this ventriloquism of the nation’s dead by imagining a past in which the dead did not in fact give their lives for the sake of the present status quo. The dead cannot have done so because they could not have agreed among

themselves, in their diversity, on what their future (our present) should be, if they thought of us at all. That is, we cannot be cajoled by our debt to their sacrifice if they did not make that sacrifice for the sake of particular agenda. In these novels, the nation is not an operative community in which we must continue the work of our ancestors. By complicating the past, making our image of it postethnic, these writers free up new options in the present.

### **Chapter 1: Toni Morrison: Piecing Together a Past**

In the often repeated words of the *New York Review of Books*, Morrison “is the closest thing the country has to a national writer.” This begs the question of how we should categorize Morrison’s work, as an ethnic writer, a woman writer, or an American writer. The intersection of all these categories is what gives her work much of its power and calls it to my attention here. In a recent lecture, Morrison demonstrated the broadening scope of her literary vision, which exceeds conventional markers of identity authorship. She did not lecture on a text by a black writer, a woman writer, or an American nationalist writer: instead, she retold the story of *Beowulf* and compared the original Anglo Saxon monster to the modern reinterpretation by John Gardner in his 1971 novel *Grendel*. The point of her lecture was, to put it briefly, that the way in which we imagine both otherness and evil can be broadly separated into medieval and the modern sensibilities. The medieval is simple and stark while the modern is fraught with the challenge of the “intellectual imagination” to configure a world occupied by many

others. This is much the same thing I mean when I say that we can no longer imagine the world in terms belonging to only one group, that the contemporary political imagination must be postethnic. Gardner's novel is a revision of literary history, and *fantastic* episode in that history as well.<sup>3</sup> Morrison's novels have themselves sometimes been fantastic (e.g. the ghost story *Beloved*), and always re-visionary within the terms of "rememory," an imaginative method of understanding the personal and collective past. Morrison has written and has been read as a re-memberer of the African American, women's, and American experience, and there is consensus that Morrison's extended creative work of rememory succeeds in its goals of healing those in need of being healed. Her recent novel, *A Mercy*, extends this project to its broadest terms, exceeding the boundaries of ethnicity, gender, and nationally by remembering a time when those boundaries were actively being drawn. (Needless to say, they still are.) I begin here with rememory because it is this model of imagining the past that draws my interest to her as a writer and that informs my understanding of the past-writing of postethnic utopia. First, though, we must answer the question, to what extent are Morrison's rememory novels, which do not invent fanciful contradictions to historical fact, utopias at all? The answer is that they are not utopias proper, but that rememory does participate in utopian discourse.

This is because Morrison's fictions are not only stories often set in the past, but also narrative depictions of individuals performing recollection. Very often, characters recreate these personal pasts in dialog with pastoral or arcadian tropes. Jewell Parker Rhodes points to the "Sweet Home" plantation in *Beloved* as one such utopia (1995). I could submit, also, the ex-slave's farmstead "Lincoln's Heaven" in *Song of Solomon*.

Both are sites of not only nostalgia and longing but also pain that must be confronted and reconfigured by the novels' protagonists. The personal past looms large in these fictions, which in some ways offer their narratives of individual rememory work as metonyms for the work that needs to be done by the African American community as a whole (at least, this is the usual reading).<sup>4</sup> Certainly, as I touched on in the introduction, the individual search for the collective "good life" is a ubiquitous theme in American literature. African American literature, such as *A Reason in the Sun*, often problematizes "the good life" with the differences created between generational experiences of different forms of oppression. This intergenerational evolution of worthy desire creates a story of progress, one that is often painfully complicated by the sense that progress can be defined, in the colonized mind, as becoming-white. But even when progress is articulated in other, non-whitening terms, the task of achieving the good life for the historically and systematically oppressed cannot not be imagined as the struggle within and against a historical backdrop. It follows, then, that success would be usually and reasonably imagined as the fulfillment of a historical progress.

By staying closer to this "real" history, *A Mercy* is hardly an alternative history in the style of Henry Turtledove, Dick, or the novel by Roth that I will focus on in the next chapter. Moreover, *A Mercy* is not, strictly speaking, an invented re-take on a historical events, as is Charles Johnson's *Dreamer* or Don DeLillo's *Mao II*. Nor is it a historical fantasy like Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. These novels are related, of course, if by no other kinship than the fact that Morrison, Johnson, and Butler all confront the problem of history as it pertains to contemporary African American identity. Yet, *A Mercy* stands

apart because it suggests a particular kind of answer to this problem, the healing processes of rememory taken beyond the limits of any one ethnicity. This method, I believe, speaks to larger concerns with the past and identity in a particularly important way. Briefly, Morrison's work shows that making an ethno-identity out of the past is not a conservative act of not forgetting history, but rather a progressive process of reinterpreting memories, both individual and cultural. If we can, in fact, reinterpret or rewrite our personal histories as needed, then likewise our present identity positions, our ethnicities, become negotiable or rewritable. Thus, rememory offers a way of thinking about the past that does not generate a sense of inevitability or destiny. *A Mercy*, in particular, resists an exhaustive version of American history that has come to dominate public discourse. In this way, although rememory does not ignore historical reality, it can contradict a particular historiography.

It may be sufficient to define rememory as reinterpreting memory, but the term has been so productively theorized by Morrison's readers that I must draw on a supplemental description. Rhodes defines the process of rememory as "a way of finding your bearings in a historical context" (1990, 77). Her comparison of memory and rememory is a particularly helpful starting point:

Memory is a disorienting, disjointed function which Morrison captures through the complex layering and interweaving of her narrative structure. The process of memory itself becomes an event as states of mind provide for the incremental catharsis of the self. Rememory, on the other hand, is a revisionary process of memory, of seeing things for what they were, not for what you thought them to be at the time, of seeing things again in the light of present circumstances, and of weighing the value of past events in order to build a foundation for living in the present and the past simultaneously. (77)

Written to comment on *Beloved*, this description does not fully account for the shift from the individual to the communal that Morrison's work repeatedly performs. I agree with Rhodes's overall claim that *Beloved* can be read (partly) as the story of how Sethe comes to rememorize the Sweet Home plantation as a bitter place, a plantation dystopia rather than a pastoral utopia. This unveiling is what is meant by "seeing things for what they were." I submit that this appeal to the actual, real, or matter-of-fact truth of the past does not function very far beyond the limits of any individual living memory. Rhodes's commentary is limited, then, to the "incremental" and "foundational" memory-rememory processes of a particular self. Moreover, it is a self that must be cleansed (undergo catharsis) in order to become clear-seeing (in the light of the present). While, again, this works well as far as it goes, it does not address concerns with what cannot be the sole domain of any individual memory or what has not been retained in personal memory at all. There remains the issue of the past that is "lost," unrecorded in personal memory or the historical record, and it is this past that most urgently needs to be imaginatively reconstructed. In other words, there is no room here for Judith Butler's unaccountable self, which I have proposed as an apt description of the subjectivity of postethnic utopianism. The acts of community that one limited being, might extend to others, generously, is precisely what I think Morrison points us toward in *A Mercy*, even in the title itself.

Set circa 1690, the novel reimagines colonial America as an inoperative community through *dramatis personae* that represents American identity as a matrix of different affiliations. This is not the same thing as a consent community, as Sollors might

have it, since the point is precisely that the novel's community is assembled through neither consent nor descent. Thus in its timing (mythic colonial past) and spacing (the diversity of characters), the novel makes a claim to an American rememory on a grander scale than Morrison's previous novels but in a way already anticipated in her critical writing. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison contests the colonial formation of American identity as "a new white man" (1993). In *A Mercy*, she contrasts that white man, in the character of Jacob, not only with an Africanist presence in the characters of Florens, her mother, and the blacksmith but also the presences of women, American Indians, homosexuals, the mentally disturbed, the poor and the indentured. This broadening of rememory to what I can only name the human community is anticipated in novels such as *Paradise*, which contrasts an intentional community of women with an intentional community of African Americans, thus offering gender as a category of domination and oppression parallel but incommensurate to race. In *Paradise* the best of all possible worlds cannot be imagined only in terms of being black or being a woman, and in *A Mercy* it cannot be imagined in the terms of any single identity drawn according to any one of several positions or ethnicities.

*A Mercy's* inclusive arcadia is a farmstead belonging to Jacob, a merchant and "American Adam" who is central and peripheral to the novel: central as the owner, and peripheral because he is dead most of the time. This reinterpretation of the colonial scene undoes the call of the patriotic dead because neither Jacob nor any of the farm's other inhabitants see themselves as the founders of a new nation in the *tabula rasa* of a new world. Jacob is dissatisfied and ornery about the colonial landscape, especially the



differences of religious affiliations between various fiefdoms. Jacob's wife Rebecca made the Atlantic crossing out the economic necessity of an arranged marriage. Lina is an American Indian whose village was decimated by small pox; she is christened "Messilina" by "kindly Presbyterians," who teach her that her traditional behaviors are wicked before they give up on her conversion and sell her to Jacob. The mentally disturbed Sorrow is shipwrecked as a young girl and adopted by a local sawyer; when she is abused and impregnated by the sawyer's sons, Jacob is asked to take her in. Jacob accepts the slave Florens in trade for debts from a Maryland squire, motivated partly out of compassion based on his own past as an orphan and partly by a sudden ambition to become a prosperous plantation owner. It is this transfer of Florens, from her mother to Jacob, that forms the framing "problem" of the story: throughout her narration, Florens wrestles with the pain of having been given away by her mother. The most striking detail, for me, is Jacob's motivation to accept the mother's plea based on his own self-identification as an orphan. This too quick roster of the farm's inhabitants shows that the members of this community arrive at the farm through choices not their own. Even the two politically free characters, Jacob and the Blacksmith, have personal histories of transatlantic displacement. There are no bonds of substance, i.e. blood or inheritance, and it would be cruel at best to call the bonds of law that united most of these characters in patriarchal marriage, slavery, or servitude to Jacob a kind of "consent." Most importantly, I think, none of them, not even Jacob exactly, are the ideal "new white man," creating a brave new "land of the free." The origin myth, here, is being made postethnic even before "ethnicity" was invented.

On the first page of the novel, as Florens begins her telling, we read “I see a minha mãe standing hand in hand with her little boy” (3). The minha mãe, Portuguese for “my mother,” is the ghost, more exactly a kind of after-image or echo, of Florens’s mother. Florens is haunted by her mother’s choice, by the choices of another person that have shaped her life. The giving of Florens qualifies in Ashraf Rushdy’s account of rememory as a “primal scene” that the narrator is compelled to remember at crucial moments in the present in order to solve or resolve a present crisis (1990). On another scale, the novel itself as a staging of a national or communal primal scene in which Americans may contemplate the choices made by the national ancestors. On the intrapersonal level, each character remembers a scene that formed their own “past” as a context for the present: Jacob recalls his experience at Jubilo that inspires him to accrue property he had not previously dreamed of owning (including slaves, to which he is disturbingly ambivalent); Rebecca recalls her crossing of the Atlantic in the company of other female transportees; Lina recounts her indoctrination at the hands of the Presbyterians; Sorrow retells the loss of her firstborn child. On an interpersonal or community level, however, the novel as a whole represents a kind of primal scene by prompting its American audience to undergo the work of rememory vis-à-vis the colonial period.<sup>5</sup>

In going back to this point in time, Morrison articulates an alternative mytho-history, one that is not only about the invention of a new white man in the context of a signing Africanist presence. Rather, the colonial scene as reimagined here is about many different individuals, in a complex network of power relations, negotiating a life together.

This narrative is not the teleological story of a nation intent on the single, unifying purpose of escape from and rebellion against European political and religious tyranny. Nor does it make the creation of that nation, a hundred years after the events of the novel, into a historical inevitability. If anything, *A Mercy* remembers America as a place, a spatial proximity or neighborhood, where a great many different people came together, in a great many different ways, for many different purposes and to many different ends. While this does not contradict historical fact, it does contract a particular historiography that has pervaded American public discourse. In doing so, it creates a counter-arcadia, an alternative imaginative history.

This alternative history of the community has consequences for the individuals as well: all the novel's characters must create their own selves out of the crosshatching of their memories and their surroundings. Lina's story serves as the best example because she makes the strongest claim that unbroken continuity with the past is not a necessary condition for present ability. Through the destruction of her village and her reeducation by missionaries, Lina's "authentic" native culture is lost to her beyond her ability to recall. Nevertheless, after the Presbyterians sell Lina as a servant to Jacob, she develops a means to resist the ideologies that had been forced on her, even without having the "real" counter-ideology at hand:

...she decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world...Solitude would have crushed her had she not fallen into hermit skills and become one more thing that moved in the natural world. (48-9)

Lina performs this cobbling together a culture-of-one in temporal terms as piecing together the bits of the past. Morrison juxtaposes Lina's resolution with the image of a chicken that nests in the corner of the kitchen: this blurring of the lines between the animal and human home speaks to Lina's revised identity as "one more thing that moved in the natural world." Thus this is a rememory project performed simultaneously on the levels of personal history, culture, and even biology. The solution offered to the solitude of being cut off from other people is to redefine her place in the world so that she not cut off from other living things. Rather than pining for materials that are lost in the past or uninvented in the present, Lina finds a way to move, a way to act, that saves her from being "crushed" by embracing the materials at hand. She assembles an identity that is postethnic in the broadest sense of no longer relying on an ascribed position in the world, but rather avowing one's place from which to speak, even if only on the limited basis of one's own small life. It is after this realization that Lina becomes the reliable housekeeper of the farm, nursing the other women through sickness and childbirth.

However, Lina's self-creation is not the entire story, and the role of "mercy," of interdependence, is perhaps more important still. Although she begins the novel, Florens does not have the last word, and the end of her writing is not the end of the book. Morrison presents a second, more painful, and more vital mercy in addition to the one Florens thinks she knows. It is the mercy that the ghost-image of Florens's mother has been trying to explain to her. Throughout the novel, Florens sees her mother's ghost (or at least, an image of her mother), moving as if speaking, but making no sound that Florens can hear. The final section of the novel presents the mother's story and explains

what Florens desperately wants to know, why her mother asked Jacob to take Florens away from her at Jubilo. Florens's mother recounts how she came to be taken into slavery, and how she came to be ethnicized as "black" rather than human. Upon arriving at Jubilo, Ortega has Florens's mother raped, and later, it is suggested, rapes her himself. It is to avoid this fate for Florens that her mother begs Jacob to take her away, because "I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight." This seeing as human, which we know from Jacob's version of the same event is based on his own "ethnic" position as an orphan, is precisely an undoing of the ethnicizing work that had been done to Florens's mother, making her "pieces of eight." Jacob accepts this bargain—which we cannot forget makes him a slave owner in a more sinister way than he has been up to this point—and Florens's mother declares that "It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human" (166-67). How can we possibly think, along with the novel, that *this* is mercy! And yet it seems that such is the mercy we can expect in a world where no one stands outside the systems of political and social power. If anyone did stand in this impossible outside position, it would be the philosopher king, on whose mercy we should rightly fear to depend. Along these lines, Florens's mother closes the novel with an axiom: "[T]o be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (167). This suggests that while larger systems themselves are not quickly reformable, and revolutions may fail, something that cuts across or 'instead of' the systems might resist the suffering they inflict. Lina pieces together a hybrid counter-culture; Florens's mother chooses a less inhuman future for her daughter. These choices

are by no means ideal or utopian, but they do break with the status quo, the situation at hand which has not been freely chosen.

*A Mercy* is, indeed, a novel of many unremarked lives, lives that were not marked down in the “pages of history” in the way that the biographies of the founding fathers were marked and remarked into a kind of hagiography. This unremarkable cast distinguishes it from a novel like Johnson’s *Dreamer*, or DeLillo’s *Mao II*, which attaches to a named “historical” personage. More importantly, Morrison’s unremarked characters are revealed as making their own kinds of marks – Florens writes her story on the closet walls. The novel remembers, in contradiction to historiographic memory, an inoperative and hence postethnic community of colonial America. These characters live in proximity with each other and in excess of the conventional account of the colonial experience.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Morrison’s colonial America was always a place with a past, never a blank slate. Although some who came there were visionaries and schemers, there was never a grand utopian design uniting everyone together as “colonists” let alone “founding fathers.” Early America as she remembers it is not even *America* in the national sense – only a collection of settlements and land-grant fiefdoms. There was not a unified, inevitable progression toward the Declaration of Independence, or any such “historical” event. There were, this novel imagines, only many different people interacting in many different ways. The systems in place meant that most people suffered one way or another. Many similar systems are still in place today. But also and most importantly, there were acts of human mercy. We can extend this to say that it is an ethos of mercy,

rather than faith in American goodness per se (its principles, its laws, its historical meaning), that the novel offers as a context for living in the present.

The novel speaks to the concerns of the early twenty-first century by imagining the past postethnically in contraction to the ways it is conventionally imagined non-ethnically. By disrupting one of the prevailing stories by which “operative” America knows itself, it dislocates the position from which many people may think of themselves as Americans of one kind or another. This origin in loss and fragmentation is represented in a story that Lina tells Florens. One day, an eagle’s nest is disturbed by “a traveler” who arrives on the mountain top and, surveying the beautiful landscape, declares ““this is perfect, this is mine.”” His proclamation causes a thunderous disturbance, and he attacks the eagle when she tries to protect her nest. The eagle, Lina says, is “still falling...forever” and the eggs “hatch alone.” When Florens asks if the chicks live, Lina answers that “we have” (62-3). Rather than being the inheritors of a utopian legacy, the novel suggests that Americans the orphaned children of a past that is “still falling” through the contingencies of cause and effect, and still haunted by the colonial edict. Eschewing historical destiny, the novel offers individual mercy as a way to ameliorate human suffering. In other words, the world will not become a better place because of the advent of a particular form of democracy. If it becomes a better place at all (and it may not), it will be it some extent through smaller, unremarkable, sometimes illegible actions.

This renewal of a sense of contingency, then, resists a prevailing sense of inevitability. It is not inevitable, in this novel, that America will be a shining beacon on a hill. If the past comprised many different ethnicities of people interacting in many of

different ways, then the future may emerge in many of different directions.

Fragmentation is the norm, not the aberration here. We tend to feel like the past is “fixed” because we know how it “really” turned out, and likewise we tend to think that the way things happened are the only way they could have happened. Remembering the past postethnically, as Morrison’s novel shows, raises the possibility that things could have happened differently. If we imagine that the past could have gone otherwise, what are the consequences for our current place in history? What kind of ethical self can we form if we believe ourselves and our communities to be other than part of a grand, hopefully benevolent design? This is precisely the imaginative experiment in Roth’s *The Plot Against America*, which imagines an alternative history in direct contradiction to what really happened. Morrison’s work helps articulate a community that is not a national identity but rather a cooperative neighborliness based on mercy rather than divine or historical providence. This helps us to say, in Nancy’s terms, that our communities are comprised not of people we are in communion with, but rather people with whom we communicate. Morrison’s novel also hints at what the substance of the communication ought to be, and with that *ought* comes a complex set of utopian connotations. All the various mercies in the novel, even the painful mercy of Jacob accepting Florens as his slave, are framed in terms of a compassionate humble generosity based on mutual incompleteness, which recalls Butler’s proposal for an ethics based on one’s own inability to fully account for oneself. There remains more work to be done, however, in detailing what this humble generosity would look like. What kind of actions would proceed from a belief that the world depends upon an uncountable number of



interpersonal mercies among mutually fragmented or limited individuals? I explore some possible answers to this question in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 2: Philip Roth: Contradicting History**

*The Plot Against America* re-imagines the clash between liberal democratic and fascist ideologies in the context of individual lives in early twentieth-century America.<sup>7</sup> I propose that the key to the novel is its setting in the 1940s, the period in American history when the newly industrialized nation solidified its identity contra fascism and communism through engagement and victory in World War II. In the decade preceding the war, the Great Depression had thrown capitalism into doubt, and fascism and communism were both seen viable alternative ideologies in ways that they would not be after the war. Roth's novel imagines a contradictory history in which the U.S. takes a fascist turn during the years 1940-42 under the presidency of Charles Lindberg. The possibility of a fascist American is certainly not outside the conventional reach of imaginative writing—London's *The Iron Heel* and Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* both project contemporary dystopias along this premise. But Roth's work is different in that it is a utopia of the past, a dystopic arcadia. It is not the only one of its kind—Dick's *The Man in the High Tower* imagined the Germans winning the war—but it is a rare instance of a past-projection that is not merely nostalgic.

*The Plot* is Roth's first post-9/11 novel, and David Brauner draws extensive comparisons between it and the Jonathan Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*,

which came out the following year. Both novels were marketed as responses to the event and situation after 9/11. The point of comparison for Brauner is how the novels explore the trauma of a historical catastrophe as absorbed by the life of a child protagonist. In this reading, *The Plot*'s treatment of anti-Semitism only "provides a pretext for Roth's primary subject: the subjecthood, and subjectivity, of Philip" (2007, 201). The imaginative flights of the child Philip within the counterfactually imagined 1940-42, accordingly, serve as Roth's comment on the therapeutic uses of fantastic detachment from the real (including the desire for an unreal place that marks the utopian imagination):

Whether being overtaken by hostile historical forces in his homeland (as in the scenario of Hitler invading America), or inhabiting an ahistorical, geographically amorphous realm ('lost in some far-off region'), Philip's visions all involve a radical self-detachment, a situation in which he defines himself as 'lost', literally and figuratively. (202)

According to Brauner, the novel is about "this retreat from everything – family, friends, community, culture, history, the ability to speak and to hear—that ordinarily constitutes, and protects, a child's sense of identity" and its cause, the "trauma" done to the Roth family by the historical forces at work in their world (203). But I am not convinced that the novel is only about trauma, nor do I think that Philip's imagination is only about coping through escapism. I agree that anti-Semitism is not the focus of the novel, although this is the widespread assumption of its reviewers. It seems to me that the key to the novel is not that horror occurs, but when and how it is brought about by individual failures; likewise, it not only matters that the protagonist survives the horror, but also and

more importantly how he learns to respond to other people in the same situation. In this attention to the individual, the novel deconstructs the us versus them narrative of America and the Nazis. This challenge to American identity and American moral authority makes the novel postethnic in general, but it is particularly so in the way it rethinks Philip's Jewish American identity and where his loyalties ought to lie.

Readers may ask, with Alan Cooper, why "through all this" trauma and controversy of the Bush administration, Roth seems intent on "hanging out back in 1940" (2005, 241). *The Plot* does not seem, to me, a desertion of the novelist's responsibilities to tackle difficult social issues (a responsibility Roth has claimed), but rather a way to come at those issues indirectly. This is not to say that the novel is some type of allegory: Roth is not using 1940-42 as a stand in for 2004. Rather, he is addressing the issues of 2004 through the past, attending to the ways in which the past is used to legitimize (or delegitimize) elements in the present. This is not the first novel in which Roth has upset conventional nostalgia: his "anti-pastoral" positions are laid out in the American Trilogy, the novels featuring Nathan Zuckerman after the four works comprised in *Zuckerman Bound*.<sup>8</sup> Taking Roth at his word that the novel is about this time *per se* and not an allegorical comment on the first decade of the twenty-first century, we can consider how this alternative history compares to *A Mercy*, which performs its imaginative work on the decades around 1690, as well as to *Gardens in the Dunes*, which works in the decades after the end of the Indian Wars. These novels are about rethinking the time when they are set: not the times themselves, but rather what those times have symbolized in American communities.

This focus on the “when” of the novel rather than the “who”—the temporal rather than the autobiographical element or the issue of anti-Semitism—addresses one of the more persistent problems critics have raised. Several commentators have questioned the ethics of Roth’s counterfactual imagination: they ask, what good is a story about pretend oppression in place of a story of real oppression? Walter Ben Michaels points to how this issue is at the heart of the book’s aesthetic appeal:

So, part of the book’s power derives from its realism, the fact that it feels like the truth... while another part derives from the fact that, of course, it’s not true—when the police come to remove the Jews from the hotel, it’s scary but, like a horror movie, pleurably scary because its history is counterfactual—it didn’t happen here. And both these facts—the fact that it could have happened here and the fact that it didn’t—are given additional power by a third fact, the fact that, of course, it did happen here, only not to the Jews. (2006, 287)

Michaels goes on to critique the functions of anti-racism in “the utopian imagination of neoliberalism” (299), a point which is clearly pertinent to a utopian-studies approach in the minority or ethnic writing. The focus, for the moment, is on the immediate question of the good of imagining a counterfactual Jewish “holocaust” in America, when a real “holocaust” actually happened to African Americans. Michaels’ counterpoints focus on the persecution of Jim Crow and segregation, but obviously a parallel refutation could be made citing the genocide of Native peoples as well.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, I insist, it is not the “who suffered” that Roth is re-imagining, but rather the years 1940-42. The importance of these two years in how Americans understand their national identity in the twentieth century cannot be underestimated. By imaginatively overturning American behavior in this period, Roth challenges the core of certain kinds of American ideology, a certain

image of what America is and how individual Americans fit into its workings. The ideology at stake here has its inscription in the American story of the Holocaust, or more specifically, the story of America and the Holocaust.

Why do we—Roth but also his readers—need to entertain a “made up” horror, when the twentieth-century offers too many “real” horrors for us to grapple with? This question and its implicit rejection of such imaginative work gestures in several directions, not only towards real American horrors, but also toward the real “Jewish” horror of the actual Holocaust in Europe. Craig Brown makes this point when he contrasts Roth’s “made up tears” with “tears that were all too real” (2004). Michaels echoes it when he asks “In what sense—except Roth[’s]... counterfactual one—is the Holocaust part of American history?” (289). One possible response to this may be simply that the Holocaust is undeniably a part of the history of many Americans, both of recent European emigration and veterans of the war itself. Following from the community history we read in *A Mercy*, we may insist that postethnic American history is more properly thought of as the history of all kinds of Americans and not only the history of what happened within the geographical boundaries of America. Any response to Michaels’s challenge depends on how we understand the distinction between the history of a nation and the histories of many singular beings who come into proximity with one another.

Whereas *A Mercy* and *Gardens* go back to the periods that emblemize slavery and genocide, Roth goes back to the emblematic moment of “the good war” or “the greatest generation.” American actions in Europe in the 1940s are a nearly sacred text of

any faith in the moral authority of America as an actor on the world stage, whether it be as the “one superpower” or as the world’s “policeman.” The only elements of the story of WWII that are acceptably held up for questioning are the domestic internment of Americans of Japanese Ancestry and the nuclear bombings in Japan. Notably, both take place in the context of the war’s “other” theater, the one without the Nazis. Americans’ image of their nation as the actor that stopped Hitler and ended the Holocaust remains the holy icon of American nationalism. This moment is not only the material advent of American military-industrial power on a global scale, but also comes to be used as the ethical warrant for any American foreign policy in the late twentieth century. When Roth revisits this moment and shows American’s behaving badly –even, perhaps, like Nazis and/or a complicit German citizenry—he challenges the mythology of the war and its use in underwriting a blithe confidence in the rightness of America in the global age, fighting fascism and soviet-style communism. American self-righteousness, not anti-Semitism, is the target of this postethnic dystopian satire.

My reading of the novel is illuminated by Elaine Safer’s in her book, *Mocking the Age*, which focuses on Roth’s humor. Importantly for my broader argument, she sees his humor as a form of imagining-the-world: “Roth makes us aware that we live in a bizarre cartoon world where the ludicrous and the calamitous merge, a world in which black humor keeps reappearing and we do not know whether to laugh or cry” (1). While the satiric uses of speculative utopias—nowheres of the present and future—is not necessarily postethnic, Safer’s reading suggests that *The Plot* may be satirical and postethnic: “The satiric edge of *The Plot* develops by contrasting the fearfully grotesque

actions of Lindbergh's followers with the romantic notion of the American Dream *and its idealistic message that the United States is a melting pot where people of different races and religions live in peace and good will*" (151, emphasis mine). The book "draws attention to the disparity between romantic ideals of equality and justice for all as opposed to fear and submissiveness of the people who fail to speak out because they are afraid of the consequences" (152). Throughout the novel, the Roth family or their neighbors insist on holding faith with the governing documents of American democracy and the institutions that protect its open society. As their hopes are defeated, again and again, these documents and institutions are not the object of mockery as much as the individual's lazy reliance on such artifacts to keep them free. Thus, the novel is an indictment of the kind of utopianism that assumes that a revolution can be accomplished once and for all, and then we rest.

The series of events in the novel systematically undoes the Roth family's sense of themselves as Americans, "as one" in communal identity with all Americans as part of an already accomplished American project or dream, the work of the founding fathers. That the novel makes its intervention "in" the years 1940-42, the years crucial to the formation of an American image of international righteousness, I would claim, gives it teeth as a critique of the actions and reactions of America in the years following September 11—which we should remember, at this point, was initially and widely compared to Pearl Harbor. As the novel reimagines U.S. as a Nazi outpost, it becomes less and less tenable to believe in the Roths as Americans, and yet there remains a lack or need for some kind of community. The obvious candidate, needless to say, is the community of being

Jewish, the community that Lindbergh wishes to ascribe to them exclusively. The novel can be read as the transformation of the Roths from being Americans who are Jewish to being Jews in America.<sup>10</sup> But this move only replaces one kind of operative community with another, exchanging the American and Jewish essentiality, without providing a postethnic (and postnational) alternative to having an essence at all.

*The Plot* very clearly, I propose, does not make this move to being Jewish but instead goes for a non-essentialism such as the one that Safer finds in *Counterlife* and other novels in which Roth refutes of the existence of any core self by having characters transform their identities this way and that. *The Plot*, however, transforms a society rather than individuals (147), suggesting that there is no core social identity like a “national character,” and thus marking the postnational within the postethnic. This is tantamount to saying, as Nancy does, that there is no metaphysical essence of a community, only the being-in-common of singular beings. In the American Trilogy, Safer explains, exterior forces cause “alternative personalities,” rather than alternative histories, but whereas the historical forces in the trilogy are basically factual, in *The Plot*, the historical events are counter-factual (148). This raises, I think, the issue of a community’s image of its operative self, its temporally construed purpose or goal. According to Safer, Roth challenges the notion of a unified individual self through the imagining of counter-lives that give rise to or arise from alternative personalities. Additionally, the counter-factual imagination of the *Plot* makes a similar move on the interpersonal level of community as well as the intrapersonal level of the individual.



The historical forces of the Lindberg Administration reconfigure young Philip as not American but Jewish, and Philip himself no longer wants to be either. He cannot be the assimilated American, as his brother Sandy can, nor can he be the fighting-and-wounded Jew his cousin Alvin is, nor the displaced-and-persecuted Jew his neighbor Seldon becomes. Rather, Philip wants to be “an orphan,” a being with no past that determines his community identity, American or Jewish. He wants to be “cut off” from the body politic or any other kind of corps, and this figure of amputation becomes important to his coming of age. By isolating himself in this way, he becomes a singular being rather than a being identified with metaphysical essences such as being Jewish or being American (or even being a Roth). Ultimately, the novel suggests, this kind of existential isolation is not disabling, but rather lets Philip offer himself to others in a way preferable to yielding to the demands of others whose claims originate in a shared identity.

The novel opens up a possibility for a postethnic responsibility to others through the conventional socialization motif of the *bildungsroman*, but here the socialization does not absorb the individuals into the adult world but rather substantiates an adult individual’s emergence into a peer position with other adults.<sup>11</sup> The hallmark of Philip’s entry into this adulthood is his growing capacity not only for empathy but also for responsibility. Responsibility, in this case, must be understood as the-ability-to-respond, and not in the sense of a “guilt” that must be borne. The issue is not how one is *responsible for* what *happened*, but rather how one is *responsible to* what *is happening*. Instead of responding to the demands of others because, like a child, he cannot refuse a

fellow Jew or American (or family member, for that matter), Philip becomes able to respond because his isolation from those around him gives him the option not to do so. He does not respond under the sway of the rhetorical power of the past—whether that past is Jewish *tursis*, the work of the founding Americans, or even biological and cultural progenitors, his parents. He does not *have to* respond because he is “Jewish,” “American,” or even because he is a “Roth.” Rather, by the end of the novel, Philip is *able to* respond because he can see others as separate and limited individuals, like himself, and he can imagine both their circumstances and a response that might mitigate their suffering.

Philip must come to terms with the pain of those around him and his own relation to that pain as one-among-them rather than being at-one-with-them. Although he initially reacts to his cousin Alvin’s lost limb with disgust, Philip gains the courage to respond to Alvin’s suffering directly after they share a room for the summer. When Philip tries on Alvin’s prosthesis, one of his cousin’s scabs sticks to Philip’s knee (138). The fear that Alvin’s injury could in fact be his own manifests and dissipates in this moment, and it is after this encounter with the sharable otherness of Alvin’s stump that Philip begins to care actively for his cousin. Out of this relationship, Philip devises a solution to one of the difficulties of Alvin’s life, getting dressed:

I found myself think about Alvin and how I could get him to forget about his prosthesis—and so I said to my mother, “If Alvin had a zipper on the side of his pant leg, it would be easier for him, wouldn’t it, to get in and out of his pants when he’s got his leg on?”... That night when Alvin pulled on the trousers after having undone the zipper, the pant leg passed easily up over the prosthesis without his having to curse everyone on earth just because he was getting dressed. (145)

Philip comes to this solution by paying close attention to Alvin's life, through which Philip is able to perceive a way that Alvin's world could be (a little) better. This imaginative modification of the world based on an understanding of human suffering is what Scary proposes in the later part of *The Body in Pain*, and we could say, in her terms, that Philip has crafted his understanding (sentience) of his cousin's needs into the artifact of a zippered pant leg. The modified clothing, then, contains Philip's counterfactual wish, his wish that Alvin did not have to struggle to get dressed. This imaginative reconstruction of a very small part of the world is an example of utopianism on a small scale, or what Popper would call "piecemeal engineering." It is, for my argument, what utopianism looks like in a postethnic community without an ethnocentric call for grand utopian visions. In the final chapter of my introduction, I proposed that the ethos of beings in such a community is characterized by generosity and humility. The care of a counterfactual imagination that arises out of thoughtful attention answers what it gives in its generosity. The question remains, though, in what sense is it an ethos of humility.

Coming from the limit and the exposure that Nancy and Butler so richly theorize, the humility here is in a very real sense a recognition of mortality. Ultimately, the emergence of Philip's sense of himself as a responsible being involves, in some sense, the "death" of his parents as his parents, as those beings with whom his responsibility is asymmetrical. It is only when he sees his parents stressed by the "Bad Days" of the novel's counterhistory that Philip can see "my mother was a fellow creature. I was shocked by the revelation, and too young to comprehend that there was the strongest attachment of all" (340). This loss of asymmetry is also a flattening of a positional and

hence a kind of ethnic hierarchy. Ultimately, the ethos that requires paying attention and being responsible is more sustainably liberating than the father-worship of democratic ideals that rely on the signers of the Constitution. It is ultimately a “better” basis for practicing the virtues desired by liberal democracies because it lacks a kind of childish hubris that “we” are the center of history or our ancestors’ benevolent plans. This is not the moral hubris of knowing good from evil, but rather the ethnic hubris of thinking the world works only for the good or ill of people like us. It is the postethnic humility of knowing that the world needs many small improvements—even as small as a zippered pant leg—and that we will need everyone’s contributions.

The novel’s final image underlines this conclusion, and returns us to the intersection of Nancy’s and Butler’s ethics. When Philip’s cousin Sheldon’s mother is killed in a pogrom, Philip likens his grief-stricken cousin to a stump for which Philip himself will be the prosthesis. Sheldon replaces Alvin

...as the person in the twin bed next to mine shattered by the malicious indignities of Lindbergh’s America. There was no stump for me to care for this time. The Boy himself was the stump, and until he was taken to live with his mother’s married sister in Brooklyn ten months later, I was the prosthesis. (362).

Taking up Nancy’s terms, this kind of inter-being (as opposed to a common-being) requires a revaluation of the space which separates and brings together, which spaces individuals at various distances. This proximity functions at several moments in the novel, with the forced relocations of the OAA and Homestead 42 projects marking most apparent the interplay of space and identity. Philip must be responsible for those close to him not through any ethnic affiliation, but rather, postethnically, through spatial

proximity and a concurrent compassion. The source of that compassion, ultimately, is Philip's own sense of himself as a fellow being, singular and traumatized, among other singular beings. The recognition of mutual singularity and mutual incompleteness or interior opacity—what Butler describes as an inability to account for oneself—motivates this care for those nearby.<sup>12</sup> The spatial terms here begin to raise the question of what counts as the proximate environment, and we will take up the question of the natural world as community in the next chapter.

### **Chapter 3: Leslie Marmon Silko: Cultivating History**

“And those who would make the boundary lines and try to separate them, those are the manipulators, those are the Gunadeeyah, the destroyers, the exploiters”

—Silko (Arnold, 9)

If Roth's novel presents us with the revelation of an inoperative community in the wake of a loss of national and ethnic communion, then Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* gives us a perennial version of this revelation. Like Morrison's colonial farmstead, the “old gardens” in Silko's novel represent a kind of agrarian ideal, but one that is situated on the other side of the boarder, with the Native Americans rather than the colonial pioneers. Her small, Edenic enclave, isolated by the desert, echoes the utopian trope of a lost world isolated, like Shangri-La, in some geographical stasis. However, rather than an intentional closed society of utopian engineers, the desert gardens in Silko's novel are the final refuge of the invented Sand Lizard tribe. With the story of these people set in

the wake of the Indian Wars, the novel revisits another key moment in the story of American identity. Just as Morrison reimagines the initial folding together of many identities in the new world, and Roth revisits the formation of the triumphal American identity in the twentieth century, Silko rewrites the civilizing mission of Manifest Destiny and the atrocity of the Indian Education programs. The cultural genocide of the Indian schools is itself emblematic of the close relationship between identity and utopianism, our ideas about selves and societies. In order for Manifest Destiny to proceed, it was deemed necessary not only to take Native lands but also to erase “Indian” cultural identities. However, *Gardens in the Dunes* approaches this familiar story from an unexpected direction, seeing cultural violence as not simply a historical atrocity but also a complex occasion demanding both persistence and an openness to change. Through the rhetoric of the garden, especially the perennial holistic garden, Silko reworks the usual story of an invasive European species along a postethnic line.

Silko’s best known novel, *Ceremony* represents specifically and compellingly the intergenerational cultural trauma suffered by tribal people, which it achieves through, most notably, a blending of traditional songs and storytelling with conventional novelistic narration. The songs and stories of the novel *Ceremony* and the healing ceremony in the novel offer yet another way of understanding the power of language in shaping the world. In the introduction, I have already reviewed in some detail broadly Cartesian theories of how language might shape the world in terms of ideology and the artifact, yet these are not the only ideas that humans have about how language and material reality interact. It would be a mistake to appropriate native beliefs about the powers of storytelling and song

to constitute real change into the heuristics of Marxism, interactionism, or existentialism. Nevertheless, the belief that words have real “magical” power in the world is not isolated to any particular tribal belief systems nor is it incommensurable with non-tribal paradigms. One example, outside the Native American context, is the Anglo Saxon word for bard or poet, *scop*, which means “shaper” and indicates the poet’s role in shaping both the story and the world as it is understood by the listener. Further, in Classical rhetoric, epideictic or “ceremonial” speech is precisely the use of words to “magically” transform reality, as for example when a official pronounces a couple to be man and wife. The magical or ceremonial uses of mythic language are an important element, Laurence Coupe argues, in the critical line that extends through Burke and Frye to Bloch and Jameson (2009). The very possibility of discursive transformation being consummate with a transformation in lived experiences requires a certain faith that “words are a kind of action,” an Emersonian aphorism. In *Ceremony*, traditional songs and stories are able to heal Tayo because they establish a sustaining bond to his community. Rand emphasizes this bond to the community’s traditional past and thereby argues that it is a stronger connection with his essential Indian-ness than rehabilitates Tayo (1995). But, I would insist, the temporality of that ceremony, like the temporality of *Gardens in the Dunes*, is not so simple.

In Morrison and Roth, I have claimed, postethnic inoperative communities replace teleological “operative” communities, but even so these “new” communities remain temporally linear. Although there is no overarching “cause” or purpose larger than individual intention, there are still rational sequences of cause and effect. Silko’s

temporality, drawing on Native traditions, is instead cyclical and accompanies an intergenerational model of justice. David Moore points out that “the wide-ranging narrative of *Almanac [of the Dead]* describes teachings of the elders who valorize patience over violence because of the cyclic power of time” (1999, 154-55). This stance, what Moore calls “radical patience,” is also a key attitudes in *Gardens*, where the cyclical power of time is seen in the perennial return of the self-seeding vegetation. This perennialism and a related inclusivity are, I argue, an important contribution to the contradiction of teleological narratives of inevitability because they resist calamitous narratives that fear change as irrevocable loss. Postethnic utopias, confronted with the already severe ongoing damages of globalization, will need to be more resilient than a debilitating nostalgia would allow. For example, a principle theme of *Gardens* is that new flowers will bloom tomorrow, which are both tomorrow’s flowers and the product of yesterday’s seeding. In its cyclical nonlinearity, this perennialism links the past and the future as consubstantial with the present. In this model, decisions are made and consequences are felt intergenerationally, but *Gardens* does not use this continuity to construct a transcendently stable identity, such as like a pure ethnic heritage, that must be preserved. In fact, the Sand Lizard attitude towards strange seeds is both practical and joyous.

The novel’s cyclical journey-and-return narrative reproduces and reverses several well known utopian or pastoral motifs. Indigo starts out in the old gardens with Sister Salt and Grandmother Fleet, is displaced into her position with Hattie and Edward, and then returns again to the old gardens where she renews her life with Sister Salt. Much of



course has changed along the way, and one important mark of difference in the return section is the message Indigo receives from Hattie, who has settled in Europe: her letter writing marks a communicative connection across the geographical and cultural distance. This voyage and return reprises the utopian narrative of a shipwrecked sojourner who discovers utopia: Indigo is violently displaced from the world she knows, discovers a dystopic civilization, and returns home with new plants, specifically gladiolas. On one hand, this reverses the city-county-city arc of most pastoral stories in which the city dweller is enriched, revitalized, or renewed by his contact with nature, as for example in Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* On another hand, it also recalls the structure of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, in which a utopian prince goes adventuring in real world. But Silko's pattern is not as romantic as Sinclair's or satiric as Johnson's: the old gardens are not a paradise, and the European people Indigo encounters are not all the objects of derision.

The difference here lays in the attitude towards the interactions between the world "inside" the old gardens and the "outside" world that Indigo experiences. The relationship between the two is represented through different attitudes toward gardening. The dichotomy of agriculture and horticulture divides different kinds of use, the edible and the decorative, which division Silko undoes with the edible decoration of the gladiola plant. First, it is the very lack of a demand that all uses be declared ahead of time that distinguishes Sand Lizard practices from either farming or gardening as it is known to the white characters. Indigo makes it a point that the Sand Lizard people are unique in their relationship to nature, which is neither that of strictly defined agriculture nor horticulture:

The more strange and unknown the plant, the more interested Grandma Fleet was; she loved to collect and trade seeds. Others did not grow a plant unless it was food or medicine, but Sand Lizards planted seeds to see what would come; Sand Lizards ate nearly everything anyway, and Grandma said they never found a plant they couldn't use for some purpose. (83-84)

Sure enough, in the final section of the novel, we are told that not only are the gladiolas flowers admired and appreciated as a unique donation to the local church (475), but it also turns out that the spud tuber can be eaten: "Those gladiolas weren't only beautiful; they were tasty" (476). Silko does not simply oppose natural and pragmatic Native agriculture with artificial and indulgent European horticulture: the imaginary Sand Lizard attitude embodies both the nutritional/medicinal and aesthetic functions of plants. It does so precisely by placing plants, and animals, in postethnic community with human inhabitants of the old gardens. I write postethnic here, but its precise inflection in this text is the post-anthropocentric.

Moreover, the native ability to incorporate the European gladiolas flowers and spuds into their aesthetic and dietary practices represents the sustaining potential of intercultural cross-pollination. The problem of such an all-encompassing "desire," as Brewster E. Fitz helpfully explicates, "can be seen not only as welcoming diversity but as also as potentially producing confusion" (2004, 194). Fitz goes on to explain how this confusion might be either babble or *glossolalia*, a pan-cultural language represented in *Gardens* by the pan-tribal community of the Ghost Dance (198-99). Without a doubt, it is fitting that we should read this fictional, intercultural linguistic phenomenon in such religious terminology, especially since *Gardens* does much of its work at the comparative linkages between early Christian and tribal belief systems. But a non-mystical

explanation will do just as well: the possibilities for communication in *Gardens* are not limited to language or the requirement that a language or culture be shared by those who communicate. It is sufficient, I think, to say postethnic utopianism sees communication as a broader category than interlocution, which can go as far as to the interactionist stance that language does not exist as an organized system but rather as a set of contingent interactions. (This is a point I elaborate in the afterword.) Thus an opportunity for cross-cultural pollination opens up through the Sand Lizard's receptive, patient, and inquisitive attitude towards non-indigenous seeds. The use made of the seemingly useless foreign material, genetic and cultural, hints at the power of Native traditions to incorporate, adapt, and amend the world as it occurs.

In its historical setting, *Gardens* invites a comparison to another "historical" novel, James Welch's *Fools Crow*. In both novels, a fairly insular tribal community—the Sand Lizard people or the Lone Eaters—live close to the land and are threatened by the encroachments of pioneering white men. There are, however, some key differences here that allow me to highlight what makes *Gardens* postethnic. In *Fool's Crow*, the tribal community is whole and sharply defined prior to the worst violence of the Indian Wars; in *Gardens*, the native community is scattered (the only Sand Lizards remaining are Grandma Fleet, Sister Salt, and Indigo) and the new neighborhood comprises people several backgrounds, including white Mormons. In *Fools Crow*, the title shaman sees the future and rallies his people to fight; in *Gardens*, Indigo is flung on her journey with no sense of futurity but a persistent patience to return home with new seeds. These differences—clearly gendered—can be attributed to the different work each novel does

and the generic distinction between a historical novel and utopian past-writing. *Fools Crow* is a valuable novel of reconstruction: it gives us the history of the Blackfeet in the Indian Wars, making this history come alive from the perspective of those who ultimately would not be the victors. It is a vital antidote to the foregone white histories that write the settlement of the west as a civilizing mission (civilizing both the wild Indians and the wilderness itself). *Gardens*, on the other hand, does not offer us a fictional historiography but rather imagines a utopian location—the old gardens—for the rhetorical leverage that such a trope offers. Silko’s novel is set in the wake of genocidal trauma: its topic is not the memorializing of that trauma as much as the performative demonstration of regenerative survival. (In the part two, we will revisit this idea with Vizenor’s neologism *survivance*.)

Taking a step back, we can observe that the title tropes of Silko’s major novels each speaks to the power of discursive practices to generate and regenerate an intercultural world that is post-traumatic and hence in need of healing (or what we might call therapy in a different context). *Ceremony* indicates the power of story and song to heal and shape our experiences and ourselves; *Almanac* “emphasizes,” according to Ami Regier, “the expansive, compendious nature of the almanac form rather than emphasizing the purity of a past set of formal practices” (1999, 185), and *Gardens* taps into both intercultural common ground and differences, both welcoming in the whole world and making careful distinctions and commitments within in.

In this way Silko reworks, or works again through a painful period in Native American history, after the most violent episodes of the Indian Wars, during the forced

reeducation of Native children in an effort to remove their ethnocultural identity. Yet she interrupts the conventional story in several details: the child does not come from a recognizable tribe and she is not taken away from a purely tribal setting. The family that adopts her is neither conventionally domineering nor conventionally libtatory: they try neither to erase nor to affirm her “Indian-ness.” And, finally, the novel does not end with a successful or failed escape attempt but rather a return. The controlling metaphor for the novel, the garden and specifically the old gardens of the Sand Lizards, represents this complexity and perennality.

Because the tribe that Indigo originates from is a product of Silko’s imagination, one might echo the concerns about Roth’s novel above by asking why we need an Indian education story about a made-up tribe when we have so many real stories of tribes whose children really were forced into Indian Schools? Is this invention a pan-tribal and thus homogenizing trope? Silko does in fact make differences among tribal identities explicit in relevant parts of the book: Indigo recognizes different native people by their specific tribal names, only using the term *Indian* when referring to how the government views things. But the Sand Lizard tribe is a made-up identity, and Indigo’s is a made-up story, which allows Silko to contradict the conventional history of cultural eradication. Such a contradiction can seem like a kind of denial of the real horrors, just as Roth’s imaginary Nazi-like regime might seem like a denial of the actual apartheid-like conditions that existed for African Americans. But Silko is not, I think, stealing attention from the real Indian children and families who suffered; rather, she is calling our attention to how

complex cultural identity and reproduction can be, and how this postethnic complexity can at least offer some reassurance if not enliven our prospects for cultural survival.

The first complexity that Silko imaginatively introduces is the blended religion of the Messiah at Needles. In the initial section of the novel, Indigo and her family attend Ghost Dances that are a mix of Native belief and Christianity. When the Ghost Dance community is raided, it is apparently because the government fears that the Messiah cult could stir a revolutionary movement. Importantly, it is not only the Indians who are heretics and targets of suppression, as Grandmother Fleet explains, “the other Mormons got tired of resisting the U.S. government. The government said only one wife, and how the new church said one wife, so the old Mormons moved to remote locations” (38). Out of this complex community of Native beliefs and Christian heresies, Indigo eventually arrives in the care of Hattie, herself a kind of heretic. Raised by a progressive father, Hattie’s thesis proposal on the feminine principle in the early Church is rejected by her committee, who compare her with May Baker Eddy and Margaret Fuller, to Hattie’s dismay (101). In the terms of the novel, then, we do not have a Euro-Christian civilizing mission perpetrating cultural genocide on a pristine and venerable Native society; but rather, we have one family of heretics adopting a child displaced from another family of heretics.

The question of interethnic reconciliation here, across unequal lines of power and in the wake of ongoing crimes perpetrated by one group against another, can be disquieting. My thinking about the novel follows Suzanne Ferguson’s observation that in *Gardens*, “Silko can be seen to perform acts of (implicit) reconciliation between Native

America and Europe, resolving some of the tensions that characterize [her] earlier works and finding [herself]—through [her] characters—more “at home” in a conflicted world” (2006, 35). By no means does this automatically let the oppressors off the hook: I also agree with Terre Ryan that the novel speaks about the ways in which “white European and American men have sought to dominate all other human beings and all of the earth’s landscapes” and that “Silko’s gardens demonstrate that imperialism begins in our own backyards” (2007, 115). But by making a postethnic representation of the processes of domination in the proximate interrelationships of complex, multi-dimensional characters, the novel affirms the memory of such crimes in a nonsimple, multi-dimensional way that cannot be reduced to imperialists versus subalterns, or, as Ryan names them, gardeners versus subsistence farmers (116). The intersection of heresies and competing forms of domination creates an intricate network that crisscrosses the Atlantic, through the narrative voyages of Hattie, Edward, and Indigo. Ultimately, the convolutions of transit and postethnic cultural reproduction, especially as these are tied to space, are made manifest in the various kinds of gardens throughout the novel.

The garden as a place of cultivation and reproduction is a fertile site for the contemplation of both utopian and postcolonial ideas about revolution. In the introduction, I suggest that if ideology is cultural DNA, then utopianism is the evolutionary mutation that accumulates changes over time. As potential sites for various levels and methods of controlling or not controlling natural propagation, gardens work nicely as metaphors for the cultural work ideology and utopia. Aside from the Garden of Eden, in the utopian tradition we have Voltaire’s satiric exhortation in *Candide* to tend

one's own garden and ignore the ineffable suffering in what is ostensibly the best of all possible worlds. A less ironic philosophy of local cultivation also crops up in Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden Book*, in which she meditates on the ways in which others may be influenced by force or example:

There must be many ways to have someone be the way you would like them to be; I only know of two with any certainty: You can hold a gun to their head or you can clearly set out before them the thing you would like them to be, and eventually they admire it so much, without even knowing they do so, that they adopt your ways, almost to the point of sickness; they come to believe that your way is their way and would die before giving it up. (1999, 141)

At first glance, the second way seems so much better than the first because it is nonviolent. But, reading through to the “sickness” and the your way/their way dichotomy, it becomes clear (as it is in the longer passage, about colonial transplantation of garden plants) that Kincaid is really describing two modes of colonization and in some ways the second one is worse than the first. Yet we still would like to believe in leading revolutions by examples rather than forcing them by guns: Gandhi's maxim “Be the change you want to see in the world” bespeaks a patience and toil that is both passive (i.e. pacifist) and revolutionary. It is not revolutionary because it violently overthrows the system; rather it is revolutionary because it resists the system on its own terms rather than the terms the system imposes. It is noncolonial because it turns the revolutionary demand inward, into the individual who desires it for herself. This complements the inward turning self-critique of Nancy's singular being and Butler's unaccountable self. Ultimately, the postethnic utopia, as an inoperative community, operates according to this paradigm of a limited, fragmented being who is not already finalized even though it does



seem (to itself) to have always existed. So, it a double or triple twist of irony, one really must tend one's own garden. The colonial project of reforming others here is exchanged for the need to reinvent oneself. Of course, even this helpful paradigm could be twisted to blame the victim, but I know of no paradigm that is foolproof against such abuses. What interests me here, as with young Philip in the previous chapter, is responsibility not as guilt but as a capacity for compassion. Accordingly, in the disruptions of the postethnic utopian imagination, violence is replaced with meditation and reflection, activity with passivity, and zealotry with patience.

We can see this replacement in the novel as Silko's imagination of the garden varies throughout: the principle contrast is between Edward's violently active orchid hothouses, which force transplantation and propagation of specimens, and the Sand Lizard people's patient, e.g. passive, old gardens, which are located on desert terraces that reseed themselves:

Sister Salt bent down to pick up the beans but Grandmother Fleet shook her head firmly. "let them be," she said. That way, the old gardens would reseed themselves and continue as they always had, regardless of what my happen.... "Anything could happen to us, dear," Grandma Fleet said as she hugged Indigo close to her side. "Don't worry. Some hungry animal will eat what's left of you and off you'll go again, alive as ever, now part of the creature who ate you." (51)

The defamiliarizing effects of this statement might not fully count as what Sulvin calls "cognitive estrangement," in the context of utopian or science fiction narrative, but it is clear that Grandmother Fleet is teaching Indigo about a world that is radically different than the teleological and anthropocentric world of conventional utopian narratives. While the novel's setting puts it in the category of the arcadian, Silko's nonlinear

temporality leads us into the present and future at the very moment that we step into the past. Today's fallen beans are tomorrow's beanstalks, just as the individual we today call Indigo may be tomorrow be part of a different creature entirely. A cyclical connection through time becomes also a connection through space, and it is the proximity of tomorrow to today that makes the concern for survival something different than a mere hanging on or maintenance of the status quo. Moreover, the loss of sovereignty over the garden and the loss of individual separateness from the natural order (e.g. the food chain) are consubstantial and encouraging. The Sand Lizard people are not the kind of utopian gardeners who plan and execute a perfect horticultural scheme; neither are they the kind of utopian individualist that seek out Romanic self-actualization apart from a complex web of relationships to their spatial and temporal neighbors. Theirs is an ecological community of proximity and contingency, e.g. an inoperative one, and this gives them a resilience that survives even the disruption of Indigo's long time away from home.

Such resilience and comfortableness in the world is a kind of neighborliness strikingly different from the narratives of teleology or neocolonialism that seek to make "peace" with the world on all sides through mastery of it. The past, in the mastering mindset, is there to be surpassed, the future to be plotted, and the immediate world is the object of "dominion." Silko's cyclical, perennial community does not seek anything, does not have any ambitious work to perform, except for their curiosity and enthusiasm for life that welcomes new seeds and new relationships, such as the gladiola spuds and Indigo's friendship with Hattie. The difference between welcoming the future and seeking it out is precisely the difference that Derrida draws our attention to when he says

that we should speak of a future to-come. The eagerness and warmth—in short, the *love*—of this generous, open stance we will see again in subsequent chapters.

A love of variety and an inclusivity towards the past and future is not a trite multiculturalism: at the end of the novel, remnants of the Sand Lizards are again isolated in their old gardens and Hattie is relocated in Europe. These characters are not resettled in some cosmopolitan wonderland, although the letters exchanged across the Atlantic keep the web of affiliation intact. Neither isolation nor Indigo's period of contact with Hattie is romanticized as utopian or dystopian *per se*. Instead, interconnected global networks of economic and biological circulation underwrite an intercultural exchange: Indigo and Hattie can no more be separated than Indigo and the old gardens can be separated, since both kinds of relationship are substantiated through living proximity and awareness that the other exists. In other words, both the Sand Lizard people and the white settlers are part of the same, postethnic world.

I have been writing about this shared-world-in-the-past as one that is postethnic, hence a kind of postethnic utopia or a world that cannot be imagined on behalf of only one group. There are, along the lines of my analysis, two general comments to make about the novels in part one. First, the novels by Morrison and Silko both use gender as an alternative category to cut across cultural or ethnic divisions. In *A Mercy*, the inoperative community of the farm is principally composed of women (Rebecca, Lina, Florens, Sorrow), and in *Gardens*, women's relationships comprise both the small Sand Lizard clan (Grandmother Fleet, Sister Salt, and Indigo) as well as the intercultural connection (Indigo and Hattie). Such a gender solidarity does not show up in Roth's

*Plot*, and we could easily enough attribute this to the different genders of the writers themselves. One can imagine, for a moment, making much the same argument as the one I am advancing using different terms, a postgender utopia. It is an interesting possibility, and one that I want to keep open by remembering that when I write *postethnic*, I really mean the *post-identitarian location* at which an inoperative community takes shape. If the “new” of utopia is the inverse of the “status quo” of ideology, then several kinds of post-status-quos must be inscribed within it. Post-structuralism, post-modernity, post-colonialism, post-humanism and so on. But there also must be a post-identity and also a post-community, an identity and a community that are not bound to the self or the world-as-it-is by the chains of the past.

The second general point we need to make is the rhetorical situation of these novels. In the introduction, I insisted that one source of the bifurcation of utopia is the different rhetorical situations of Plato’s Socrates and More’s Hythloday. In the former, utopia is the master plan of an authority, and in the latter it is the jest of someone speaking truth to power. I do not, of course, mean to initiate a reader-response argument here. Rather, I want to acknowledge that Morrison, Roth, and Silko are each speaking truth to power using utopian tropes, or at least novels that enter into utopian discourse from various directions to different degrees. Published in 1999, *Gardens* is the earliest novel here, although Roth’s counter-identity novels and Morrison’s rememory novels have been with us long since. All three novelists are, generally speaking, of the same generation and that generation is, increasingly, marked by a post-Cold War conservative sweep of American politics in the Reagan revolution, the Republicans’ “Contract with

America” in 1992 (an operative paradigm *par excellence*), and the administration George W. Bush. With momentum from the preceding twenty years, the politically ascendant ideals in America in the decades around the turn of the twenty-first century have been the “New World Order” ideals of a “neo-conservatism.”

The point I want to make here, which is relevant if not surprising, is that the neo-conservative version of the past underwrites a teleological agenda similar to the Manifest Destiny that marked westward expansion in the previous century. One of the projects of neo-conservatism is the exportation of American liberal democratic utopia to the rest of the world. We can see in Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History* that this argument is grounded in the belief that American political norms are the inevitable and final product of history and human social evolution. It is this belief in the purposeful and inevitable unfolding of American history that the novels in part one contradict. One part of this history holds that America’s past is an unblemished unfolding of the ideals of human liberation. Neo-conservatism relies, in part, on maintaining the vision of early America as an egalitarian shining city on a hill, created by a noble cadre of “founding fathers.” Another key part of this history holds that America is an inherently benevolent actor on the world stage. This belief invokes the story of America’s opposition to fascism and Nazism in the twentieth century. And yet a third part of this history hold that the progress of America is the progress of civilization per se. These national myths are contradicted in *A Mercy* by imagining the colonial past as a matrix of many different individuals and projects, in *The Plot Against America* by seeing America’s anti-Nazism a temporal contingency rather than an expression of national character, and in *Gardens in*

*the Dunes* by imagining the perennial resilience of non-Western ways of life. The importance of individuals and “national character” to these projects participates in a general conflation of individual development and national development. This requires some consideration of what it means to come into being, as a person or as a nation. As we have seen, the ways in which personal and national history are “lost” and therefore in need of imaginative (re)construction have important implications for our identities and our ethics.

The story of how things were and how they will be is the lynchpin of any teleological paradigm, and all modern Western ideologies are such in one way or another. While one might desire a non-teleological expression to counter the demands for temporal coherence and inevitability, the only way to dismantle the utopian ideologies of modernity is to grasp that lynchpin and give a firm, contradictory pull. *A Mercy* does this by revising the colonial mythos prior to the great work of 1776; *The Plot* challenges blithe faith in the work of 1776 as a stable, complete “done deal”; *Gardens* persists in maintaining that an alternative lives even after the work of “history” as been done. These novels offer a post-American identity that is not the New World Adam, and they reminded us that being good to each other does not have to depend on shared ethnicity (on national, familial, or cultural identity). Both *A Mercy* and *The Plot* try to make the past flexible, to “restore uncertainty,” and to remember that when the past was present, the future was uncertain. In compliment, despite that uncertainty, *Gardens in the Dunes* finds comfort in a faith that flowers will grow next year. These writers make our present look like the uncertain product of the past, rather than the culmination of a teleological

oeuvre. This disrupts any narrative of progress and resists the illusion of telos that comes from knowing how the story turned out.

Remembering that the past exceeds history creates flexibility – the question is, if we are uncertain and things are flexible, how do we cope? Morrison's Lina shows us that we can cope by cobbling together a way of moving in the world; Roth's Philip finds that that we can cope by attending to the world at hand. Silko's Indigo tells us to look sharp, be ready to run, and gather new seeds for planting. All these methods are decidedly present-minded, and the next question to be asked is how one pays attention and how one navigates the present day.

## PART 2 / NEGOTIABLE GEOGRAPHIES

### **Cartographies Natural and Utopian**

We have seen that the act of imagining a national (Morrison), personal (Roth), or ethno-cultural (Silko) past replaces an ideology of historical inevitability with a sense of temporal contingency that welcomes the utopian “new.” In part two, I turn to the imagination of “the present,” the world that surrounds us in the now.<sup>1</sup> As we shall see, paying attention to the world-as-it-is-not matters a great deal to how we live in the world-as-it-is. Although contemporary readers have grown accustomed to utopias constructed at a temporal distance, in the past and future, the present-tense utopias in part three are categorically not distanced in this way. They must be, then, distanced spatially, either in terms of geography or culture. The spacing of subjective culture and objective landscapes gives us an opening into the postethnic imagination of alternative present conditions, through, for example, the importance of space and proximity that we outlined in the introduction in the philosophies of Nancy and Chakrabarty. In part two I will bend the term ethnicity, especially in the chapter of Richard Powers, beyond strict definition in line with American racial minorities. As we look at the intersection of poststructural language and postlogocentric epistemology within postethnic identity, we must keep in mind Stuart Hall’s claim that ethnicity offers itself as a broad term for identity because it names the sociocultural position from which one may enunciate. Thus in the same way that part one required a subargument about identity and memory, this section on the



postethinic utopia written in the present requires a subargument on language and location. The acts of the imagination in postethnic present-writing are not feats of inventive memory, but rather inventive cartography.

Despite the general tendency to conflate utopia and science fiction, the spatially distanced, geoisolated utopia is actually the traditional form. The utopian romances and satires of the Renaissance and Enlightenment were more often set in a remote geographical location than in a remote temporal one. Utopian adventure stories of the early modern period (and even today) participate in a conflation of space and time characteristic of the modern-imperial imagination. In such discursive fantasies, contemporaneously existing peoples are described as somehow anachronistically “primitive” or “advanced.” Anne McClintock describes this trope as “panoptical time...the image of global history consumed – at a glance – in a single spectacle from a point of privileged invisibility” married to “anachronistic space” (1995, 37-40). While McClintock’s argument has to do with race, gender, and class in the British Empire, the point of view she describes plays its role in American history as well, having underwritten both the evangelical defense of slavery and the genocidal “modernization” of native peoples. This goes to show, in broad terms, that cultural fantasies dictating nonsensical temporal relationships to geographically distanced others in pseudo-evolutionary terms have had very real and tragic consequences.

I am using the term *cartography*, the discursively produced and productive mapping of geographical regions or landscapes, to name the relationship between geography and culture. It is too simple to say that people in different places have

different worldviews, or that the cultural construction of space means that a cemetery reads differently than an airport terminal.<sup>2</sup> In ecological terms, we might most usefully link geography and culture in terms of migration and evolution. Comparative linguistics and philology tells us that languages evolve and change as populations are separated through migration over geographical boundaries: over time, people in different valleys begin to speak and do things differently. Such is also true bodily norms, both performative practices (styles of clothing, beautification, modification) as well as what biology might call phenotypes (physiological ethnic markers, such as skin tone or hair texture). In this way, geography and time form pathways by which groups of people are divided and grow apart. In some sense, we only have ethno-cultural difference because of geographical boundaries and the succession of generations. At the same time, over the course of modernity, those boundary lines have become less geographic and more ideologic, less material and more imaginary. The ideological regulation of such frontiers is precisely the theme of the novels in part two, and my argument here is that a postethnic utopian disruption in this context allows these writers to resist the demands to remain loyal to one cartography instead of others. When we understand our received cartographies as imaginary, we have the opportunity to imagine alternative maps of our world.

We could say, indeed, that we live in the world according to how we imagine it to be. In part one, I argued that Morrison, Roth, and Silko contradict certain kinds of historiography which each finds inimical to healthy community. By refuting ideologies of historical inevitability with stories of temporal contingency, these writers also refute

one set of imaginary relationships in favor of another. Part two again takes up this question, now addresses the interactions of individuals with others in the world around them rather than with others in the personal and communal past. Whereas the act of representing different histories contradicts *inevitability* with *contingency*, we will find that the act of creating different cartographies contracts ideological *fixity* with imaginative *negotiation*.

The novels that I discuss below mark, more clearly than the novels in part one, an intersection between utopian tropes and literary postmodernism, especially the self-reflexive and intertextual operations we call *metatextuality*. American literature has produced a great number of naïve utopias that do not include an ironic distance from their own projects<sup>3</sup>. Granted, it is not surprising that American utopias in the time of literary modernism are not postmodernly self-reflective. As a point of comparison, we can note that of the major works from this period that are set in the narrative present—*Herland* and *Walden II* top the list, although London’s “near future” *Iron Heel* might also qualify—are ethnocentrically focused on framing and solving problems from one point of view. However, not all American utopias written in the time of literary postmodernism are necessarily postethnic: for instance, Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975) is clearly dialogic, and hence more textually complex than early novels, but it does not put the totalism of its utopian visions into question. This is also the case with the arts-and-crafts utopianism of Kunstler’s more recent *World Made by Hand* (2008), a post-apocalyptic novel that shares several ecological themes with Callenbach. What is missing here is the ironic or self-reflexive distance that characterizes literary postmodernism, which is an important part of

what Moylan means by the term *critical utopia*, utopian novels that bring the total utopian imagination into question. The specific object of critical reflection in the novels below is how the product utopianism of a particular community demands that people live in its world with non-negotiable boundary lines of allegiance. As we shall see, whereas the demands for particular identifications in part one were made in terms of inevitability, the demands confronted in part two are made in terms of the objective fixity of the subjective cultural world.

Because the problem of postethnic utopia is the problem of who decides “the good” and for whom it is decided, it requires a heuristic distinction between how we imagine others and how we imagine the good. In the present tense, there are at least two kinds of counterfactual wishes potentially at work. The wish of naturalism is the desire that certain parts of the world or human experience not-be-hidden. Martha Nussbaum describes this specifically as the aspiration for people to see with empathy lives that are hidden from their own through difference or distance. Additionally, we can observe, pace Nussbaum, there is another kind of inclination that wants people to see the world as-it-is-not. This can be called a utopia if it represents how the world ostensibly should-be and a dystopia if it illustrates how the world ought-not-to-be. (And of course, these basic categories can each be made to function in naïve and ironic, romantic and satiric forms.) But, for certain, the utopian imagination is an articulation of a nonexistent world in a different sense than fictional worlds in general can be said not to exist. Ultimately, in this chapter, we will find that these two kinds of counterfactual wishes are entangled one with the other and our heuristic distinction breaks down in a useful way. In one sense, this

entanglement and collapse is already hinted at by the ambiguity and paradox of the words “could” and “possibility.” For is not the rhetorical power of both naturalism and utopianism their invitation to be believed? Nevertheless, distinguishing these forms of the imagination for the time being helps focus the question at hand, the operations of literary cartography as invention rather than measurement.

Are the virtues of imaginary map-making different from the virtues of naturalism, which maps the world with geographical fidelity? How do these virtues complement one another in the encompassing framework of the literary imagination? The novels in part two each take up this question by asking, first and foremost, what the utopian imagination can do in the present tense, when the concerns of past and future seem to recede from notice. We can better theorize what the postethnic utopian imagination does if we ask by and for whom this kind of imagination is employed. For whom do we write and read fictions, of this kind or any other? What does the practice of postethnic imagination accomplish in the world? How are its accomplishments distinct from the accomplishments of naturalism? The writers in the next several chapters each wrestle with different parts of these questions. Chabon’s work, in its imaginative diversity, suggests that we draw our own maps of the world. Powers’s encyclopedic imagination represents a world can be navigated by many various, intersecting routes. Finally, Vizenor’s trickster heroes illustrate the importance of play and irreverence to finding pathways for survival in a hostile world.

## Chapter 1: Michael Chabon: Imaginary Homelands

The usual apology for the utopian imagination is that this kind of sociocultural projection allows participants to immerse themselves in an unreal world as a means of escape from the real one. This is an especially neat answer to the question of distinction from naturalism, because it allows one to theorize naturalism as an imaginatively empathetic turning towards the world and utopian fiction as a turning away from it. This would accord with Mannheim's description of utopia as a kind of incongruence with the present: naturalism, utopianisms complement, would be simply defined as congruency. The Jewish district of Sitka in Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* presents itself at first glance as one such wish-fulfillment land, and according to at least one detractor, its escapism indulges a deeply problematic denial of the urgent reality of the Jewish situation. The critique of Chabon's different landscape is similar to the critique of Roth's different history: some things, in these cases the persecution of the Jews, ought not be made the object of the imagination. However, I believe a careful reading of Chabon's novel reveals a cleverly disguised denial of certain kinds of destructive fantasies in favor of a very ordinary set of ethical commitments. In other words, the novel is about the problem of mapping out a homeland more so than it is about the problem of Jewish persecution.

Chabon's collected body of writing exemplifies creative restlessness, the playful vitality of the postethnic imagination. His career has transitioned from early works of self-described "literary naturalism" to more fantastic genres as seen in the young adult

high-fantasy *Summerland*, the meditation on American comic book writing in *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Clay*, and the historical adventure story *Gentlemen of the Road*. Superhero stories in *Adventures* are recommended both as an *escape* from reality and as a *supplement* to reality.<sup>4</sup> They allow the articulation of a demand contra Hitler, contra disappearing fathers, and so on. The fantasy world of Sitka in *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* also expresses a counterfactual wish for an impossible supplement. The novel responds both to the “disappearance” of Yiddish in the twentieth century and also to the wish for the “phrases would I need to know in order to speak to these millions of unborn phantoms to whom I belong” (2007, 23). In its ethnic focus, as a Jewish utopia, and its apparent affirmation that language mastery is a prerequisite for belonging, *Union* engages with the question of utopian ethnicity and the operative or inoperative forms of community. On the surface, it seems to advocate an operative community of Yiddish speakers; I will argue that this first impression is only one side of a deep ambivalence that ultimately avows communities of proximity and choice rather than ascribed ethno-religious imperatives.

Much of the commotion about the novel, which Chabon responds to in detail in his essay “Imaginary Homelands” (2008, 157-80), takes offense at the notion that important and real things can also be imaginary or in-our-heads. In part one, I have already discussed the basic assumption that ideas are real, albeit a different kind of real than the material things that convey them. The interplay of real ideas and real places, especially through the funhouse mirror of neologisms and utopias (*utopia* itself being a kind of portmanteau), relate to the broader difficulty of home as it is constituted by

language and location: Chabon's novel is a literary experiment in mapping an imaginary homeland. The writer has described his experimentalism in terms of a trickster tradition, albeit a Judeo-European rather than Native American one, "the spirit of doing things *af teselokhis*, out of spite, a kind of magical, Trickster spite.... If I could outrage a few people with one little essay—how many could I piss off with an entire *novel*?" (179). The importance of the trickster figure to the present-writing of postethnic utopia surfaces again in a later chapter on Vizenor. For now, we need only see that tricksters are by nature outrageous. Here, the outrage results from Chabon's essay on a 1958 Yiddish phrasebook, which he called "heartbreakingly implausible" because after the new state of Israel adopted Hebrew instead of Yiddish as its national language, there is no place on earth where this phrasebook could possibly be useful. "Say it in Yiddish seems an entirely futile effort on the part of its authors," he says, "a gesture of embittered hope, of valedictory daydreaming, of a utopian impulse turned cruel and ironic" (2007, 19). The phrasebook eventually led Chabon to imagine the kind of homeland it implied, "I kept thinking about those Jews up there in Alaska, making their Yiddishland.... And little by little at first, and then all at once, the idea began to assemble itself: I would build myself a home in my imagination as my wife and I were making a home in the world" (2008, 178). In this way, the boundaries that divide and unite a community and family—homes and homelands—become the overarching theme of the novel's inventive cartography. As a postethnic utopian novel, it offers a way to understand how contingency, community, and location entangle to map out a homeland.



The relationship between language and culture, and the need to invent one in order to create the other, is well known to writers and readers of such fictions. I have already hinted at the importance of trickster language here, and in Vizenor's work especially we can see the magnitude of neologisms in trickster discourse. A more traditional account of linguistic invention is located in J.R.R. Tolkien's work, in which the language of the elves in fact preceded the composition of the best known stories. (Tolkien, a gifted philologist, invented languages for the mythical creatures of European folklore from an early age, as a hobby.) Additionally, we have the examples of Orwell's Newspeak and Anthony Burgess's Russian-infused patois that colors *A Clockwork Orange*. Although Yiddish is certainly not an invented language on the order of Tolkien, the dialect of Sitka does resemble the constructed slang of Burgess's dystopia.<sup>5</sup> Chabon constructs a neo-Yiddish with such uses as "shammes" for *detective* and the complex pun "sholem" for *gun*. Because the creation of a fantasy milieu requires the convincing, astute impersonation of place and person, ecological as well as interpersonal empathy, it shows us, in literature at least, the capacity of language to map out a sensorium in the reader's mind. In an interview with Liz Perle, Chabon describes this task,

Sustaining that act of seeing and inhabiting another place or person—whether it's the life of an English professor in Pittsburgh one weekend, or a Czech kid escaping Prague in a box with the golem, or two adventurers in Khazaria in the year 1000—that's the hardest part about writing... I still have to put myself into a state where I'm feeling, hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting and touching everything the characters are experiencing. Then I still have to find a way to get all that sensation into language and make it magically appear inside the mind of the reader. (2007, 31)

Again, as existentialist critics would insist, the work of literature is the work of sharing our perceptions of the world. Although we may rush to conclude that this philological-existential model returns an operative language as the foundation of community, the very ability to invent new worlds in excess of a language indicates that language mastery itself is subsequential to experience, perception, and communication. Davidson makes his infamous about language (that no such thing exists) in the context of malapropisms,<sup>6</sup> but the argument works as well for neologisms or nonsense words. The potency of language is not its fixity to the world but its looseness from it. Trickster writers can lie (“tell stories”) about the world they perceive, thus sharing a “false” world, one that does not exist at all. The writer is able, with important limitations, to create, through creative language, an artificial world “magically... inside the mind of the reader.” While the execution of such a feat holds some fascination as a skill and an art, the question remains what is it good for? Why bother constructing fantasy worlds out of words?

Although Chabon has been widely acclaimed, his alternate map of Jewish geography opens him to the same charges of impiety and lack of authenticity that have confronted Roth’s alternative history of Jewish persecution. D.G. Myers goes further, however, into the *ad hominem* by describing Chabon as “an imaginary Jew” and asking “whether Chabon has actually assimilated himself to this tradition or merely decked out his writing with bright Jewish feathers” (2008, 572). This claim is mostly based on the *Say It in Yiddish* episode, and Myers insists that Chabon gets his problem wrong from the start: “Chabon might have learned the real reasons that Israel adopted Hebrew as its official language. Instead, he set out to imagine an ‘alternative history’ in which the

country that rejected Yiddish has ceased to exist” (585). In other words, according to Myers, Chabon has tried to punish Israel by writing it out of existence, an affront that no “real Jew” could contemplate, only an “imaginary” one. As it turns out, Myers’s reading of the novel and my own are not actually very different: we both think Chabon is rejecting ethno-religious imperatives (messianic destiny) as a necessary condition for hope as a singular being. However, Myers finds this bankrupt on two counts. First, Chabon gets both his Yiddish and his Judaism wrong (e.g. the plural of *yid* should be *yidn*; the *tzaddik ha-dor* is not synonymous with the *messiah*; Chabon “arranges a Oasidic wedding on the Sabbath”). Second, although Myers allows “some of this might be chalked up to mere sloppiness,” he insists “the slips and errors are significant because they *betray the novel’s true point of view*” (586, emphasis mine). The critic assumes that what Chabon has to say is so inimical to what an authentic Jewish novelist would say, he would never come right out and admit it. Thus what has been discovered must be an unwitting betrayal rather than a purposeful revealing. This scandalous “true point of view,” according to Myers, is “a particular ideological perspective. In this view Zionism represents a betrayal of Jewish history and exile is the proper Jewish condition” (587).<sup>7</sup> Thus, the novel is only a “polemical contraption” intended to rail from “an imaginary Judaism, which they [imaginary Jews like Chabon] have created out of nothing” (588). Myers’s criterion of ethno-historical piety is also a demand for a certain kind of representational fidelity, the fixed cartography of naturalism. This demand is so important, in light of actual suffering, that the process of invention itself is untenable.

More exactly, any temptation to take our eyes off the “real,” even for a moment, is too dangerous to indulge, and the processes of the imagination are *ipso facto* suspect.

However, as I said before, Myers and I do not disagree that Chabon is clearly rejecting one part of one version of Jewish identity, Zionism. What Myers might call the moment when Chabon betrays his true point of view, I would call the moment of Landsman’s *anagnorisis*:

I don’t care what is written... I don’t care what supposedly got promised to some sandal-wearing idiot whose claim to fame is that he was ready to cut his own son’s throat for the sake of a hare-brained idea. I don’t care about red heifers and patriarchs and locusts. A bunch of old bones in the sand. My homeland is in my hat. It’s in my ex-wife’s tote bag. (368)

We should remember that, in addition to being the story of clashing imaginary homelands, Chabon’s novel is also a detective story. While one arc of the story has Landsman investigating the death of the messianic utopia—the murder of the Tzaddik Ha-Dor—the narrative has him solve the problems of the familial, interpersonal, postethnic utopia instead. Detective work, in this context, extends to any process of putting together the pieces of the world that are presented to us. It is a kind of cartography – looking for clues like landmarks and trying to piece them together in a geography that can be safely (or at least knowledgably) traveled. This is, of course, a process that has often been thought about in the context of language and rationality. On these themes, Chabon’s novels is related to other postmodern detective stories such as Paul Auster’s New York Trilogy. As the settlement of Sitka faces planned dissolution, the novel choruses “it is a strange time to be a Jew.” Such existential strangeness,

familiar to readers of Auster, is bound up with the utopianism of Sitka itself: “By now they were all staunch Alaskan Jews, which meant they were utopians, which meant they saw imperfection everywhere” (31).

Jewishness, of course, comes with own set of utopian figures clustered around the topic of Zion and the messiah. Predicated on, among other things, a hope for a kind of perfection, both Messianism and Zionism entail a view of history that is at least teleological and in this case specifically eschatological. Landsman faces the reversion of Sitka to American control with a particular fatalism, musing that he is “Seven months into the unknown world to come. Another diminutive prisoner of history and fate, another potential Messiah” (41). The recurring promise of messianic potential becomes, here, part of a fated history that at this point in the novel holds Landsman prisoner. When the world is imagined as a perfectible place, the detective is called upon to “solve” the imperfections of the world. In Auster’s novels, this means investigating the gaps between perception, language, and identity. In Chabon’s, the detective must investigate who killed the potential messiah, the Tzaddik Ha-Dor, and what this has to do with the Zionist ambitions of religious and political powers that be. Without trying to offer a complete reading of the novel, we can draw some conclusions from the thematic constructions of two “helper” characters: Landsman’s ex-wife Bina and the boundary maven Zimbalist.

Both these supporting characters put the world into a certain kind of order, temporal or spatial. While Landsman is “paid to notice what ordinary people do not,” Bina’s detective work is compared to storytelling:

Her gaze is not as comprehensive as his—she misses details sometimes—but the thing that she does see, she can link up quickly in her mind to the things that she knows about women and men, victims and murderers. She can shape them with confidence into narratives that hold together and make sense. She does not solve cases so much as tell the stories of them. (158)

Thus Bina keeps order in the world, maps it, by tying elements together in a comprehensible narrative. The goal of the narrative is to determine right and wrong, or more exactly to identify and punish criminals. The boundary maven's order-making is likewise concerned with right and wrong, but operates on in terms of spatial cartographies rather than narrative language. Zimbalist is responsible for maintaining a strict grid-work of sanctified thresholds, which are constructed partly from variety of ropes and cables strung up around the settlement to create "imaginary" doorways that allow whole neighborhoods to be considered a single household.<sup>8</sup> Thus the boundary maven's work is not only divisive (creating boundaries) but also cohesive (binding together). He orders the world in space, keeping complex charts and maps of the various doorways strung up around Sitka. His made-up spaces complement Bina's made-up stories. Space and time, maps and stories, are represented as the principle means of inventing the dimension and meaning of the world around us.

Both of these kinds of ordering contribute to the conclusion of the novel, the solution of the murder mystery and the restoration of Landsman's broken marriage. Again, Landsman is the quintessential detective, the person who pays close attention. He notices details, but it is the ability to bind and articulate details together (with string, with words) that makes the world we live in. This tying-together can be deeply problematic when it insists on commensurability with an ordained fate – the novel's Zionists are

willing to kill the potential messiah himself to bring about the perfect world he should usher in. Landsman himself seems reluctant, as the story unfolds, to take strong action. As in the abandoned chess games that pepper the narrative, his position is such that “He has no good moves... they call that *Zugzwang*... ‘forced to move.’”(400). He decides at first that he “would be better off if he could just pass,” and keep quiet about the terrorist destruction of the Jerusalem mosque. The novel is, in many ways, about the detective arriving at a capability to act, which depends on his accepting narrative threads and geographical demarcations without being inexorably bound to them. This reconciliation between paying attention to detail and creating order occasions both Landsman’s reunion with Bina and his decision to out the criminal plot.

In the final pages, Landsman reconciles with his wife, from whom he had separated following the mistaken abortion of their only child, having blamed himself for favoring the abortion of what turned out to be a healthy baby (a birth defect had been feared). In his mind the promised land of Zion and the promise of a child stand as equally powerful signs of a wondrously benevolent future:

Any kind of wonder seems likely. That the Jews will pick up and set sail for the promised land...That the temple will be rebuilt...War will cease, ease and plenty and righteousness will be universal...Every man will be a rabbi, every woman a holy book, and every suit will come with two pairs of pants. Meyer’s seed, even now, may be wandering through darkness toward redemption, striking at the membrane that separates the legacy of the yids who made him from that the yids whose errors, griefs, hopes, and calamities went into the production of Bina Gelbfish. (407)

Prior to this conclusion, belief in the perfectibility of the world made his mistakes unbearable. Landsman cannot forgive the unwarranted abortion so long as he holds to a

criterion worldly perfectibility. His aborted child and Mendel, the murdered Messiah, are both unbearable guilts because he believed all future happiness depended absolutely and finally upon them. Bina, however, takes a very different view of the abortion, and she does so in the terms of maps and boundaries, the vocabulary of geographical and interpersonal ties that makes a community:

We did what seemed right at the time, Meyer. We had a few facts. We knew our limitations. And we called that a choice. But we didn't have any choice. All we had was, I don't know, three lousy facts and a boundary map of our own limitations... (410)

Ultimately, then, the couple are reunited in the context of their shared limitations and their shared past. As Nancy and Butler help us see, their mutual apprehension of exposure to the unknown—each other, death, the future—is the very call to love each other. Their past does not have to be a historical tragedy, although there is pain in it. Bina redraws the landscape, retells the story of what happened, so that Landsman comes to believe that he

...has no home, no future, no fate but Bina. The land that he and she were promised was bounded only by the fringes of their wedding canopy, by the dobeared corners of their cards of membership in an international fraternity whose members carry their patrimony in a tote bag, their world on the tip of the tongue. (411)

The final lines refer to the Yiddish Policeman's Union, and Landsman's intimate union with his wife either is an extension of or extends to the professional union to which they belong. Both are limited, invented ties that nonetheless give actual, expansive meaning



to the world. As the marriage union promises future children, the professional union promises future society by punishing criminals and keeping the community safe.

Both unions, Chabon suggests, work best when they are understood as flexible, limited, and contingent as language itself, able to “carry... their world on the tip of the tongue.” With this view of the work at hand, which I would describe as postethnic, two dilemmas are solved at once: Landsman will tell what he knows of the terrorist plot and also will be able to rejoin his wife. Both the ability to sustain an intimate relationship and the ability to act ethically in the world are predicated on a rejection of a certain relationship to the world in favor of its alternative. Landsman becomes free to act only by rejecting the belief that a past mistake is a historic tragedy and likewise rejecting certain inflexible cartographies of home, future, and fate. This postethnic transformation drops the burden of acting correctly in circumstances where mistakes are gross transgression against the historicist and naturalist demands for total loyalty. It takes up the responsibility of acting the best that one can, within certain boundaries and also bound together with other people.

Chabon’s novel, then, is about imaginary communities, to recall Anderson’s title, but whereas Anderson refers specifically to nations, Chabon suggests that all communities are products of the imagination. There are more such communities in the book than one would first suspect. There is of course Chabon’s creation of the District of Sitka, but there is also the conspiracy group of the Zionists and the “nation of two” that Bina and Landsman form. Then, there is the Verbover sect itself and the imaginary household that the boundary maven creates and maintains. The novel is a community of

communities. Boundary lines separate and join together – to be “bound together” is to be both in a community and separated from other communities. In this sense, taking a phrase from Mary Louise Pratt, we could say that the novel is about borderlands and contact zones (1991). It may be that all the works of the utopian imagination are, in Pratt’s words, “linguistic utopias” (1988). Language creates social worlds; this much is agreed upon even when we differ as to whether those worlds are sustained in superpersonal, interpersonal, or intrapersonal ways. Whether we explain the social realm as “language,” the “third space,” or “ideology,” there is a general consensus that communication is about living together in the world. At the end of the twentieth century, after the Cold War stalemate that divided one world into three, when not only one ethnic group faces globalized existential threats, we can no longer think that we live together only with those like ourselves. Creating a postethnic image of the world and people is a work for literature—what Nancy calls literary communism—and in that sense our imaginary communities are becoming, for practical if not philosophical reasons, postethnic.

## **Chapter 2: Richard Powers: The Connectionist Imagination**

The inclusion of Powers in a study organized around ethnicity is not obvious, but I argue that his encyclopedic novels and his “connectionist imagination” constitute an important kind of postethnic outlook on the world. What is more of a challenge, here, is the implicit indication that postidentitarian utopia means not only that groups labeled

“ethnic” become postethnic, although many do claim postindian, postMexican, and postblack identities by name, but also that white people become postwhite. This is not an easy argument to advance, partly because whiteness itself has been constructed as a non-ethnic identity: returning whiteness to the postidentitarian world requires first that we push it out of its central position, which generates ideologies such as “assumed whiteness,” and then revisit it anew. I cannot even begin to fully explore the number of white writers who ethnicize white identity at various locations, including non-Anglo European cultures, pagan European or Gnostic belief systems, and non-bourgeois “poor white” culture. Silko certainly opens the door for connections between native North American and European spirituality in *Gardens in the Dunes*. Likewise, solidarity between the black community and “poor whites” is widely expressed in African American writing, for example in Langston Hughes’s “Let America be America Again,” and more broadly in the “fusion” movement in Southern politics at the turn of the twentieth century. Postwhite identity also appears, in various guises, in writings that locate identity in a natural region or experience, as in the desert stories of Mary Austin, the poems of Gary Snyder, or the ecological-class configuration of Janisse Ray’s *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*.

Powers’s novels, however, do not do any of this conventional work and remain, stubbornly, silent in terms of race, class, or gender. This does not mean that identity is erased from the scene—*Plowing the Dark* features an Iranian-American protagonist—but it does mean that Powers is not read as a writer of ethnicity. Nonetheless, insofar as critics have read his fictions as concerning identity, I propose, even this silence on the

conventional categories of resistance is being reconfigured in new ways. My central claim remains that these novels show we can no longer believe that the world can be imagined in the terms of one kind of people. Powers's fictions, broadly speaking, engage with the epistemological problems of representation that are familiar to readers of postmodern literature, and which are, I would add, existentialist in their assumptions about experience, perception, and identity. This kind of displacement of identity is included by Stuart Hall along with those inspired by Marx, Freud, and Saussure, but rather than simply attributing it to Nietzsche, Hall characterizes it as the end of a particular, Western location of truth caused by "the discovery of other worlds, other peoples, other cultures, and other languages" (1989, 11-12). That is, the disruption of modern epistemology that we know as "the postmodern condition" is a consequence of no longer being able to conflate one way of seeing the world with the world itself. Our notions of truth have gone post-solipsistic, more specifically postethnic. Furthermore, this "discovery" of/with others is part of seeing the world as a very capacious, diverse, complicated, place. That sense of awe, the humility of any one human being's perceptive capabilities, is what infuses Powers's novels, making them postethnic even when they say very little about ethnicity on the surface.

Now it may be that Anglo-Caucasian experiences of "the dark night of the soul" or "existential angst" are not as compelling as the bodily suffering of minority ethnic groups. And it would be a ridiculous to claim that resisting ennui is as politically urgent as resisting, say, the structures of environmental racism or getting serious about various ceasefires, peace talks, or other life-and-death negotiations. But bourgeois ennui exists in

the same world as the toil of the peasants and the struggle of the proletariat, and it is becoming less and less tenable not to include every kind of human experience and imagination in our representations of that world. Specifically, Powers revises the nonidentity of whiteness through the reconfiguration of the sovereign knower—an imperial idea with expressions in Descartes' *cogito* and Bentham's panopticon.<sup>9</sup>

Although Powers maintains the existential freedom of individual perception to interpret experience, he locates this freedom within a system of limitations that include other people and the physical world. In doing so, his novels collectively argue for the interconnectedness of all things, including the person perceiving the connections. Power's privileged viewer is, then, embedded as a member of the natural order rather than a sovereign over it.

This connectionist cartography outlines the world in different ways, towards different ends, than the traditional linear narrative landscape of naturalism. In the same way that Chabon's diversity of imaginary worlds exemplifies the creative potential of map-making, Powers's imaginative mapping of the world's diversity through his encyclopedic technique exemplifies the powers of an inexhaustible fascination with the world that is mapped. Powers's is one of several encyclopedic postmodern (and white) novelists who work to illuminate the vast contingency of the world as a whole. They produce, for the most part, large novels. Thomas Pynchon does it in *Gravity's Rainbow*, letting the narrative veer and shift through many contingent encounters among scores of characters. Don DeLillo does it in *Underworld* when he follows a baseball forward and backward in time (a different kind of cross-section). Neal Stephenson does it in his dense

historical-scientific novels such as those in *The Baroque Cycle*, packing in a terrific amount in arcana and lore culled from scientific and philosophical history. Yet we may ask, what is the virtue of imagining the world as big and complex? How does this kind of as-if world differ from a reductionist one? When literary fiction strikes its readers with wonder and amazement at the strangeness and constructedness of the “here and now,” the effect is much the same as when a science fiction or fantasy writers dazzle them with fairyland and distant planets. The sense of the world as a place rich with possibilities, both dense and malleable, is at the core of a postethnic rethinking of fragmentation. That sense is also, I claim, at the core of Powers’s fiction. Although most of his novels fit the bill, *Galatea 2.2* and *Plowing the Dark*, in particular, offer ways of thinking about the interactions of writers and readers in the representation of such a world.

In a 2008 interview, Powers spoke to Stephen J. Burn about the metafictional and encyclopedic nature of his “connectionist” novels. For Powers, everything in the world is connected to every other thing, and the human processes of mapping and navigating the world remain eternal and recursive acts of self-creation. Three quotes illustrate Powers’s view of the relationship between fiction, the world, and the people living in both:

[N]ot only [can] literature be a form of genuine knowledge, but it [can] represent and enact kinds of interdependent knowing that other disciplines acknowledged but [are] unable to reach...From the very beginning...my vision for fiction was predicated on the notion of interconnectivity and a view of “long time” (2008, 169).

Later,

My only difficulty with the word “intersection” is that it presupposes boundaries in the first place... There truly are no independent disciplines that operate exclusively of any other—just people, acting out of very human hopes, fears, and desires. And fiction is uniquely privileged to place its camera at those imaginary boundaries between disciplines... (171)

At last,

The novel of information is uniquely suited to speculate on how individual existence impinges on collective reality, and how, with regard to saying what it means to be alive, everything connects with everything else. (174)

These comments relate fictional worlds to the real world itself, and literature as a mode of inquiry to other modes of inquiry. More to the point, we can relate the structure of Powers’s novels and their themes to a particular way of being in the world, one that is characterized by a process of linking together fragments not to arrive at the revelation of a whole but rather in the sense of articulation that Nancy attributes to the inoperative community. It is an active, recursive, negotiable process of being.

We are familiar with the ways of being that naturalism can encourage— literary humanism’s principle virtue, empathy. Reading Chabon and Powers, we can see that the postethnic utopian imagination encourages, in contrast, play as its principle virtue. Playfulness, I propose, is the postethnic utopian complement to naturalism’s empathy. If naturalist fiction emphasizes the need for a certain kind of connection among human lives, then connectivist fictions emphasize the need to be at play in a fragmented world where everything is or can be connected in multiple ways by the innovative cartographer. The argument has been made, exhaustively, that naturalism’s sense of empathy is necessary for liberal democracy. We will have to wait until later in this chapter to

consider why a postethnic sense of play is also a vital necessity to these concerns. But first, we need to better understand how the connectivist imagination works, what it implies, and how it relates to other facets of postethnic utopianism I have been describing.

Burn glosses his interview with Powers helpfully, and several points in particular stand out. First, he attributes to the novelist an “ecological vision,” a sense of a world in which “environment and individual reciprocally shape and direct each other” (164). Second, he tells us, the rhetorical “shock” effect of mixing of conventional and metafictional frameworks “is meant to direct the reader outside the book, driving her back” to the world (165). And finally, in regards to the density of information in a Powers novel, “Data...is not antithetical to empathetic characters as much as it is the very reason why we should empathize with other individuals, *similarly lost in the ocean of information*” (166, emphasis mine). The sense of being *lost* is very like the experience of being *limited, exposed, or fragmented*, and we should understand that Powers’s main thesis about the information rich universe is that we are all lost in it together. No one of us—or one kind of us—has a vantage point from which to find, save, or repair the rest. In this sense, the interdependence of survival in a vast information-rich, mutually reinforcing and self-organizing interconnected cosmos, the connectivist epistemological model is a postethnic utopian one.

The two novels I focus on here, Powers describes as dealing with “the symbolic nature of knowledge formation” and a “descent into extreme ‘locked room’ subjectivity” (175).<sup>10</sup> Following Burn’s observations above, we can see how Powers maps the



common ground shared by the coldly intellectual and the warmly heartfelt, postethnically contradicting a particular set of assumptions about the separation of ideas and emotions, mind and body. These novels read in places like atlases because the world is a vast place; but they are also miniaturist in their attention to the human beings who interact in and with that world.

*Plowing the Dark* explores these themes through an interlaced double narrative. In one thread, artist Adie Karpol is hired by a software company to help refine their virtual reality software. “The Realization Lab,” a division of “TeraSys” has developed “a second-generation, experimental, total-immersion environment modeler” (24) that is called, with a nod to Plato, “The Cavern.” This device is “an unlimited fantasy sandbox, perfect for a girl to get lost in”(25). It can immerse individuals in a crayon world, a painting by Degas, or a projection of world oil consumption mapped on a virtual globe. Thus, in the Cavern, every level of representation, from crayon scribble to photorealism, exists on a continuum with a sliding control. The novel concludes, as we shall see, that in a nonfrivolous sense we live in a crayon world of perceptual ideas as much as a photorealistic world of material experience. At the beginning, though, Adie is hired to help stage great works of art, down to the individual brushstrokes, so that users can walk around inside their favorite paintings. As she warms to the challenge she finds herself “a tourist in her own Eden” (58), able to invent not only maps but also completely three-dimensional spaces out of the human imagination. The software can also be used to create complex virtual models of the world. For example, a representation of petroleum use is able, apparently, to forecast a peak oil collapse in the near future. Thus, the virtual

reality machine becomes an emblem of all manner of representational powers, from the fine arts to scientific projections. Virtual reality, here, stands in for the image of the world that we each carry around in our head. It is real, but not in the same sense that the world itself is real. The question, though, is how much the virtually real can matter.

In a second narrative thread, told in the second person, “you” are an Iranian-American teacher taken captive in an unspecified middle eastern country and held hostage for several months. This story is the more literal exploration of “locked room subjectivity” that Powers refers to above. While captive, the teacher finds recourse in the stories that he creates in his mind. The use of second-person narration is important here because early in the novel, in Chapter 10, Powers uses second-person narration to describe walking through the Cavern’s “Jungle Room” program, blurring the line between the prisoner’s imagination and the representational capacities of virtual reality. The Jungle Room is based on Degas’ *The Dream*, which one character interprets as a picture of a jungle that has grown in through a woman’s living room windows. The parallel crossing of the threshold distinction between The Cavern and the prisoner’s cell—both emblems of the human skull with its sensory windows—is the symbolic action of the novel. The narrative works towards the staging of an ineffable moment when Adie in her virtual reality machine and the captive teacher in his own mind miraculously interact each other. The event is never fully explained, and this lacuna suggests that the connection made through the exchange of virtual realities (e.g. through reading and writing) is something mysterious, wonderful, and sustaining.

With these twin storylines, Powers addresses the value of art in an age of digital simulation, on the one hand, and in the face of human suffering, on the other. We might even call these the poststructural and the postcolonial faces of postmodernity. While Adie becomes more and more disillusioned that the genius of individual painters can be indistinguishably reproduced by the right kind of software coding, the prisoner becomes increasingly reliant on his own imagination to mitigate the pain of his condition. Ultimately, then, the novel asks if art in the digital age can respond to human suffering in the ways that “hand-made” art has done in the past.

This question, and its answer, can be approached in the context of Powers’s earlier novel *Galatea 2.2*, which marks a self-reflective turning point in his work and features the kind of fictionalized self we see in Roth and Auster. In the novel, a writer, apparently named Richard Powers (although the name does not occur often in the text), who has written four novels identical in description to the four novels Powers had written prior to this one, assumes a fellowship post at a research institute in his old college town. He becomes involved in a Pygmalion-style bet: he will help create a computer that is able to pass a Turing test using a graduate English exam covering works “from Beowulf to Virginia Wolf.” His challenge is to create a computer intelligence that can read as well as a human being – the criterion for success is that the machine’s answers should be indistinguishable from the answers given by a human test taker. The philosophical problem is not unlike the one that Nussbaum raises when she claims that the narrative imagination helps us not to doubt that the people around us are people and not convincing robots. The challenge to make a machine read like a human is analogous to *Plowing the*

*Dark*'s question on what it means if a computer can create an ersatz brushstroke indistinguishable from a genuine one made by Degas. These novels, taken together, ask what constitutes human identity when machines are able to flawlessly imitate the activities that have been considered key identifiers of human-ness, the ability to create and interpret art. The answer, which gives us both the connectionist and postethnic reading of these books, is the experience of living in an embodied, limited, and exposed position.

Throughout *Galatea 2.2*, Powers problematizes writing fiction by commenting on his previous novels, and the narrating persona seems to be on the point of abandoning literary discourse. He has a full blown case of existential-postmodern ennui, which as I have already hinted needs to be more often recognized as representationally located primarily in white experience as reflected, for example, in novels by DeLillo, Pynchon, or John Updike. By the end of the narrative, however, his writer's block lifts, apparently in light of the answer the computer intelligence Helen gives to her test prompt. The task is simply to explain two lines from *The Tempest*, spoken by Caliban: "Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises,/ Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not." Helen's response insists that these lines can only be meant for an embodied (human) being:

You are the ones who can hear airs. Who can be frightened or encouraged. You can hold things and break and fix them. I never felt at home here. This is an awful place to be dropped down halfway... Take care, Richard. See everything for me.  
(326)

With this, "H. undid herself. Shut herself down." Whereas the human graduate student, the control subject in the Turing test, has responded with "a more or less brilliant New

Historicist reading... a take on colonial wars, constructed Otherness, the violent reduction society works on itself,” the machine “reads” the literature as something continuous with living in the world as one embodied person among others, witnessing, apprehending, and making things. The response of the narrator to this message unfolds over the final two pages:

She had come back only...to tell me one small thing. Life meant convincing another that you know what it meant to be alive. (327)... I turned from the office, struck by a thought that would scatter if I so much as blinked. I’d come into any number of public inventions. That we could fit time into a continuous story. That we could teach a machine to speak. That we might care what it would say. That the world’s endless thingness had a name... Each metaphor already modeled the modeler that pasted it together. It seemed I might have another fiction in me after all. (328)

This passage touches on a number of interrelated elements, and it is their complicity that is precisely the point, that is, the constructed nature of most utopian projects considered simply as “public inventions” of what “we could” do. Powers, here, takes up the by now familiar position that orders of time and space are equally the products of human invention. Both function through symbolic interaction—the place names on maps, for instance—and social communication is also the invention of the world in human terms. Inventive or better yet re-inventive memory and cartography are alike in that both break from a criterion of correspondence or accurate, authentic signification. The thingness of the world, Powers tells us, does not have one true name that can be inscribed on a map, no more so than the contingent sequence of events in time has one true historical trajectory. Rather, in Helen’s “reading” of Shakespeare, art makes sense only when it is addressed to other people rather than to its own object, history, or world. Literature is *for*

others rather than *about* others. Life here entails a postethnic requirement insisting that because we do not simply exist in communal identity with others, we must take up the task of communicating to other people, convincingly, that we are alive.

To put it in terms of the retold Galatea myth, there is no good in getting a machine to read Shakespeare, even though it can, because Shakespeare's writing does not do any good for a machine reader. It is useful for a human reader, one that lives in the world with other people. It follows, then, that art and the imagination in *Plowing the Dark* are not considered good in terms of any measure such as original genius or aesthetic unity. That is, they are not good in terms of the writer's identity as a genius or even the identity of the work as an original—the Cavern's computers mitigate the demand to revere the artist or the work by creating art out of computer code. Rather, art artifacts are good, in this postethnic paradigm, only insofar as each particular one is useful for the person who receives it.

In the final scene of the novel, Powers gives us a moving image of such a counterfactual wish come true. The prisoner is on his way home, still dazed by what he takes to be his "hallucination" of Adie in a virtual/imaginary Hagia Sophia. It is the connection with her, at the moment he had given up hope, that has allowed him to hang on: "It left you no choice but to live long enough to learn what it needs from you" (414). But having survived, about to disembark to be reunited with his wife and child, he hesitates, thinking "And how you will survive another's company again becomes the only real problem... there will be talk, there will be touching. There is no earthly way you can

bear it” (415). He is thinking here of his wife; what surprises him is the “smaller other” who turns out to be his daughter whom he has not seen before. He observes,

Your love rushes toward you but stops short, sobbing at the thought of real contact, of what happens next. Her small shadow steps forward from her. You look down and see your girl, this Scheherazade, whose name plays everywhere across her face, clutching a picture she has drawn for her foreign father. She clings to you as if she’s known you all her short life. Grasps at long last the fable she’s grown up on.  
“Look,” she says, shoving her drawing into your shaking hands. A crayon man, returning to a crayon house. “Look! I made this for you.” (415)

In this moment, through the symbolic action of the novel, the real and the artificial have become blurred in the notion of the “virtual.” Certainly, the freed prisoner is not a crayon man, nor is he returning to a crayon house, but he is in some virtual sense “the fable she’s grown up on.” Like the narrating persona at the end of *Galatea 2.2*, the prisoner is both the maker and the thing made, a being created postethnically through and in the midst of the connectedness of all things. According to this idea, human beings have a particular set of experiences that connect us to each other as sentient language users, while at the same time, as singular beings, that human sentience is only one node in a cosmic network. The humility of this position, which does not deny the impressive powers of cognition but rather incorporates them into an embodied experiential paradigm, allows the characters in a Powers novel to find their way forward toward each other and toward the world at large. In this way, the power of art is not only the making of a beautiful world (the virtual paintings) or an “as if” world that allow a better kind of problem solving (the program that charts the peak oil collapse). It is those things, but also it is

something made for another person (look! I made this for you). And according to Scarry, like all artifacts made for people, it contains a compassion and a counterfactual wish.

As I said at the beginning of part two, the question of utopia in the immediate present is the question of the demand for geographical fidelity or the license for inventive cartography. What is at stake then, is the freedom to map the world as we wish it to be. This freedom is, most broadly, part of a postethnic ethics of representation because it calls for an acknowledgement of self-determination. Not only should we be free to make our own maps, but so should others. However, this is not the most radical or the deepest implication of connectivism for postethnicity. The connectivist idea of interconnectedness means that our maps are also interconnected, that they inform and shape each other. Again, according to our own tastes we can invoke “*différence*,” “dependant arising,” “*ubuntu*,” or other understandings of this kind of relationality. In the world as Powers describes it, we need as many maps as we can get because the universe is a complicated place and no one standpoint—no one ethnicity—can survey the whole thing. But even more than what we need pragmatically, in a connectivist imaginary, of necessity we cannot not interactively share our maps because we cannot not live in each other’s worlds.

### **Chapter 3: Gerald Vizenor: The Trick of Survival**

“Most of the stories about the tribal trickster are not sacred, wicked, wise; rather the trickster is eternal motion and transformation in the stories. The



trickster is boasted on cue and comes to naught; no critical closures,  
representations, or essential cultural conditions could hold the stories”

—Vizenor, Introduction to *summer in the spring* (13)

Several keywords reoccur in Vizenor’s novels and discursive writing, forming an almost mantra or chant-like effect: *survivance*, *trickery*, *tease*, *natural reason*, *manners*, and *terminal creed* to name a few. In one of the rare recent articles on Vizenor, Kathryn Hume proposes that understanding his lexicon, in which “words have been altered or wretched from their usual connotations to serve his purposes” (2007, 580), is key to “a sense of how his literary projection of consciousness challenges received reality” (582). It is precisely this altered reality, a “trickster consciousness” that relates Vizenor’s work to Chabon and Powers: all three novelists remap the world postethnically, each operating in broadly existential-pragmatic paradigms of linguistic world-making, albeit each is grounded in different traditions. We may extend our catalog of postethnic methods for engaging this world-shaping power of language to include the shamanic in Vizenor’s novels, in much the same way we extended the theories of healing power of memory to include the ceremonial in Silko’s. Vizenor’s “idolect”(597) creates a what Hume calls his “cosmos,” in which all things, human and nonhuman, are potentially alive and interconnected (584-91). While this relates to Powers’s connectivism, in which a privileged viewer creates connections through enlightened perception, in Vizenor’s world it is the existential or natural connection of all things that allows a marginalized trickster figure to elide and elude capture. Powers’s viewer can see anything because he is not pinned down; Vizenor’s trickster cannot be pinned down because he can say anything.

The power of musical verbal repetition is perhaps the most undertheorized marker of Vizenor's Anishinaabe cultural background. Also called the Chippewa and the Ojibwe, "[t]he Anishinaabe were" according to Alan Velie, "traditionally the most musical of the Indian tribes. Musicologist Frances Densmore wrote in *Chippewa Music* (1910) that when an Anishinaabe visited another reservation, 'one of the first questions asked on his return was, 'What new songs did you learn?'"(2000). This apparently real practice of collecting songs from other tribal groups resembles the invented Sand Lizard practice of seed collection in Silko's *Gardens*. While not all native songs are ceremonial, the ones that are signal an important difference from the conventional notion of a literary poem: they are Burkean equipment for living in the sense that ceremonial poems "[serve] ritual purposes: healing, political consolidation, or propitiation of deities" ("American Indian Poetry", 1993, 42). While clearly different from popular notions of "magic spells," songs and stories in native traditions are accorded a spiritual power to affect life and experience.<sup>11</sup> In the discussion of Silko in part one, we noted that ceremonial or magic speech can be an instructive paradigm for the functions of language as a real part of the world rather than an unreal reflection on, description of, or gesture toward it. Silko's premier novel, *Ceremony*, exemplifies magical language infused from a native tradition into a nonnative one, a blending of ceremonial healing and a literary work, the novel. Vizenor, like Silko, was named as one of the "four masters" of the Native American renaissance by Alan Velie (1982). A revision of his 1978 novel *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, Vizenor's 1990 *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* pits the power of a trickster's natural reason and survivance against the terminal creeds and word

wars of white culture. In doing so, Vizenor fuses native trickster traditions with postmodern *jouissance*, while at the same time escaping the “prison house of language” and discursive stagnation through what he calls natural reason, which is, for me, another sign of the ecological ground for the postethnic imaginary. Before turning to *Bearheart* in detail, we should explore the role songs and natural imagery in Vizenor’s early poetry and academic training, which have informed his concept of postindian identity.

The first stage of Vizenor’s literary career consisted mostly of haiku poetry, a form which he finds comparable to Anishinaabe songs in their brevity and natural imagery (Lee, 1994). Despite what we might expect, Vizenor was familiar with haiku writing from his military service in Japan *before* he was “introduced” to Native American poetry at New York University (Velie, 2000). Later, and most significantly in his award-winning novel *Griever*, Vizenor would retrace these early cross-cultural connections in the relative trickster traditions of Chinese and Native American cultures. The trickster’s reversals and surprises are ultimately what is most important, in this chapter, to my overall argument about postethnic utopia, and Vizenor’s biography is illustrative here because it thwarts conventional assumptions about where, how, and to whom ethnicity is reproduced or handed down. What makes such trickery both utopic and postethnic?

On that question, let me digress briefly to confront the problems of using any cultural characteristic as a warrant for comparative study as well as the way trickster discourse cuts across these problems. The use of any cultural form by those outside the culture raises concerns about exploitation, and “use” can include any engagement with the material from assessment to appropriation to appreciation. The question, here, in

terms ethnicity, is whether certain cultural artifacts belong exclusively to a descent group. This problem is especially keen in Native American studies. To whom does native culture belong? Who gets to tell native stories or stories in the native tradition? Who gets to listen to them? As cultural artifacts cross the parochial boundaries of reservation nations that are defined and managed by the Bureau of Indian affairs—Hollinger would remind us here that the five principle racial identities in the US are perpetuated by the options on the official census—their circulation is another indicator that people migrate postethnically through formerly separated imaginative landscapes in much the same way we migrate around the physical geography of a postmodern world.

Thus, postethnicity requires a theory of cultural exchange and mixture reasonably safe from appropriation and colonization. *Ceremony*, along with *House Made of Dawn* and other landmark texts of the native American renaissance, gave nontribal audiences a new look at tribal beliefs, and it is not surprising that “outsider” interest in these novels would remind many people of “outsider” fascination with and exploitation of native culture. Paula Gunn Allen, in particular, accused Silko of a kind of cultural betrayal for telling to outsiders what ought to remain the property of those inside the pueblo tradition (1990). That Silko herself should be accused of playing into the hands of those who would appropriate and abuse native traditions has a particular resonance, because she herself, in “An Old-Fashioned Indian Attack in Two Parts” (1978), leveled related charges against Snyder for his work *Turtle Island*. For Silko, it was wrong for the white poet to use pueblo cultural material.<sup>12</sup> The question of the benefits to Snyder, in critical reputation if not monetary profit, makes this an issue not only of representation but also

appropriation. In the Allen/Silko dispute, members of the community should not profit from sharing insider information, and in the Silko/Snyder dispute, outsiders should not use materials that originate from inside Native American cultural traditions. The whole inside/outside paradigm, along with the notion of culture as property belonging to a people rather than persons, or persons themselves belonging or not belonging to a culture, is heartily mocked by Vizenor's "crossblood," irreverent, mobile tricksters.

Approached from an ecological rather than a cultural framework, Snyder's poetry and activism underlines the salient point that cultural material is fungible in a way that cultural identity ostensibly isn't. Of course, one of the assumptions for the argument that I am making about postethnic utopianism is that contemporary life makes it increasingly untenable to imagine a world only for the good of a selfsame ethnic identity, and the presence of others in one's ideal world inevitably raises the probability of exchange and transmission of everything from poetic schemas to DNA sequences. So it makes weird and wonderful sense that Vizenor, the mixed-blood Anishinaabe, and Snyder, a Euro-American with some Irish/Scotts heritage, have Japan in common. That is, both writers have incorporated Japanese haiku, and/or haiku like imagery, into their work. Of course, haiku is, arguably, the principle influence on Ezra Pound that sparks the Imagist revolution and inaugurates modern poetry in the West, so Snyder's beat poetry already owed something to Basho. Nevertheless, Snyder and Vizenor draw more directly and deliberately than that on the haiku tradition not only for their poetry but also for the belief system haiku attention solicits: an attention to living moments and the natural world that Vizenor comes to call, if I grasp this phrase correctly, "natural reason." Snyder, of

course, also incorporates Buddhism in a way that Vizenor does not, and as an “ecological” poet, his use of Native imagery can be critiqued as participating in the common, racist trope of Native Americans as “noble savage” environmentalists. Vizenor’s work, as we shall see, generates a different kind of spirituality and has its own non-environmentalist ecology. In fact, being “at one with nature” is a principal characteristic of invented Indian identity (invented by whites) that Vizenor critiques in *Bearheart* and, more broadly, with the idea of postindian survivance.

The trickster figure, central to Vizenor’s ubiquitous invocation of the Anishinaabe trickster hero Nanabozho, is helpful for comparative study because the quintessential trickster behavior is the crossing of boundaries and the violations of cultural normativity. Chabon, who often refers to the Norse trickster Loki, associates the trickster’s linguistic feats with aesthetic pleasure in general. “Yet entertainment,” he writes, “remains the only sure means we have of bridging, or at least of feeling we have bridged, the gulf of consciousness that separates each of us from everybody else” (2008, 5). So the trickster’s hijinks, stories and poems, art and pleasure are about transgressing both the normative cultural boundaries that tie a community together and the borders that separate communities from one another. We do not get only the benign half the trickster here: the excessiveness of art means that the life-force that brings us together can also upset our values, as Vizenor’s novels often do. On the transgressive laughter, John Lowe’s article on “postmodern ethnic humor” is instructive, linking the trickster novels of Vizenor (*Griever*, 1987), Maxine Hong Kingston (*Tripmaster Monkey*, 1989) and Ishmael Reed (*Reckless Eyeballing*, 1986). These novels form a cultural network that spans the globe

(Africa, North America, and Asia), but the connection also depends upon a local proximity, the writers shared time at Berkley (1996, 103-104). Thus, trickster tales become a means of connecting up the world, but in a way that is importantly different from the panoptical dislocation of Powers's "connectionist" seeing and the detective work of Chabon's imaginative remapping. Powers and Chabon both see and draw new landscapes from the flux of experience around them, but the trickster in Vizenor's novels refuses to see or draw any such new product. Instead, trickery is a risky, dangerous process of unseeing and boundary-crossing.

Elizabeth Blair's explication of the crosscurrents of trickerism and "postmodern language games" is helpful here. "Vizenor's writing" she observes, "has remained problematic for those who attempt to fit it into a paradigm of Native American literature" (1995,75). We might conclude that one reason for this difficulty is the trickster's own reluctance to be fixed into any paradigm at all except for his own humor and capriciousness. Vizenor is certainly upsetting, as we shall see, to any sanctimonious veneration including the condescending "respect" accorded to tribal people. That respect, his writing clearly argues, is only another form of cultural distancing that serves agendas of marginalization and oppression. This does not mean that Vizenor forsakes the particular political causes of Native Americans. (In fact, he has extensively advocated having museum "specimens" of Native skeletons returned to tribal communities for burial.) Blair sums up the politics of his postmodernism nicely when she observes that "[a]ccording to Vizenor, deconstructionist theories release tribal narratives from the translations of social science... [his] theories about postmodernism are inseparable from

his theories about the Native American trickster.” (76-77). As a case in point, she turns to his first novel, *Darkness in Saint Louise Bearheart* (1978) and its revision as *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1990). Blair’s excellent close comparison of each of version of the novel concludes that “the violent, scatological, polymorphously perverse world of dream returns to the tradition as written text” (88-89), which is to say that *Bearheart* is a messy, strange novel. But these characteristics, I propose, are only performative expressions of the novel’s postethnic thesis that trickery is an irreverent means of survivance in an oftentimes chaotic and cruel world.

Compared to Chabon and Powers, Vizenor focuses more on the negotiability of beliefs rather than the powers of redescription. Chabon might use language to invent a homeland in which to settle down, and Powers might leverage the privilege of an ostensibly unlocated identity to see in all directions at once, but Vizenor questions the finality of any such activities. What matters in his novels is not how the world is described so much as the beliefs that are motivated from and towards those descriptions. What he calls *terminal creeds* are not only those beliefs that make us sick to death, *terminally* ill, but also those beliefs that rely too much on *terminology* to heal us. Moreover, they are those beliefs in the *terminus*, in the end of change that Plato’s philosopher king promises. For Vizenor’s tricksters, words are instrumental and not an end unto themselves, which is not the same thing as insisting that every speech act must have a practical, decorous application. Sometimes, the uselessness of dirty jokes is itself a form of resistance, especially against the clean and sober righteousness of a protestant



American work ethic. Thus the “word wars” are cultural battles fought over and with words but not for the sake of words.

The postindian irreverence of trickster survivance is illustrated, mortally, in the “Terminal Creeds at Orion” chapter in *Bearheart*. The pilgrims arrive at Orion, an walled community founded on a doctrine of ironism or of questioning all ideas. The gate keeper greets them by asking “what use are your hands if they never question your view on the sides and shapes of time and experience?” (192). Yet Belladonna, one of the tribal pilgrims, still makes an impassioned, tone-deaf speech for romanticized Indian identity: “We are raised with values that shape our world in a different light... We are tribal and that means that we are children of dreams and visions... Our bodies are connected to mother earth and our minds are part of the clouds... Our voices are the living breath of the wilderness.” (192). Her audience quickly raises the question, “Are you telling me what you are saying is exclusive to your mixedblood race?” Bella affirms this, “Yes! I am different than a whiteman because my values and my blood is different.” Prompted by the audience, she elaborates, “Indians have more magic in their lives than whitepeople... Indians have their religion in common... Indian blood is not white blood... tribal people are closer to earth...are not competitive people like the whites...” (196). The audience insists that “Indian” is an colonizing creed and that Belladonna’s invocation of a pan-tribal identity is nonsense because “the rule has too many exceptions.” They decide that she “speak[s] from terminal creeds... Not a person of real experience and critical substance.” As Belladonna continues to expound how “My tribal blood is like your great red wall.... My blood moves in the circles of mother earth and

through dreams without time.... My tribal blood is timeless and it gives me strength to live and deal with evil....” her hosts fetch plate of poisoned cookies, her “just deserts.” She is condemned for being “a terminal believer and a victim of her own narcissism.” The idea hunters at Orion declare that “the histories of tribal cultures have been terminal creeds and narcissistic revisionism” (198). Belladonna’s final act is to write an ironic line in a ledger of such terminal creeds: “Our hearts soar with the eagles of our people” (199). In the logic of the narrative she cannot survive this episode because what Vizenor calls survivance requires continuous living—including the personal growth and change that comes from critique—which means that it is more than merely staying alive by not dying. To continue to live, according to this analysis, native peoples cannot rely on the ostensible strength of the culture named “Indian,” partly because such a culture cannot be actually located among the diversity of tribal communities, and more importantly because the pan-tribal concept of “Indian” is itself an invention of toxic colonial discourse. Thus survivance—which, I want to highlight, has an evolutionary rather than a conservative thrust—must be post-Indian.

The novel relates cultural survivance to human ecological survival, and the resistance to cultural extermination is also the resistance to extinction. Both extermination and extinction are, in this paradigm, terminal creeds of white culture. The jack copy for *Bearheart* glosses the story in this way: “the tribal pilgrims reverse the sentiments of Manifest Destiny and travel south through the ruins of a white world that ran out of gas.” While such a robust and simple refutation of a painful history might help to sell books or galvanize critical interest in the novel, Vizenor’s spatial negotiations are

trickier than a simple reversal. Throughout *Bearheart*, the benevolent trickster Proude Cedarfair not only moves forward with the band of tribal pilgrims, encountering a series of satiric challenges that allow Vizenor to mock this or that “terminal creed,” but he also returns imaginatively, in a dream meditation, to the cedar circus where his father and grandfather’s bones are located. Despite this remembrance of the past, Proude is always moving away from his ancestral home. The novel ends with his departure for the “fourth word,” taking almost none of the pilgrims with him, saving not even his wife, who is raped by the wicked trickster “clown” Double Saint. Although Proude often has the last or definitive word in each satiric episode (it is importantly he who defeats the “evil gambler”), as an expression of the trickster cultural hero he cannot be a leader or a prophet. His movements in time and space are more subtle than a simple march toward or against a dominant (white) narrative.

*Bearheart* stands apart from Vizenor’s other novels, which are connected together through characters of the Browne family of the White Earth Reservation. This postethnic kinship network, a cross-blooded, cross-cultural family of tricksters, “remaps” time and space without reliance on identitarian solidarity nor a non-identitarian omniscience. Even though “impure,” these relationships or lines of descent are not discounted: Vizenor’s novels are unified through the articulation of the Browne family’s extended genealogy as something objectively substantive. In a way, the extended family is like Roth’s several interconnected sets, and the imaginative location of the White Earth Reservation functions in much the same way as Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha county. However, in Vizenor the vitality of belonging operates on a consent model: culture and

identity are not final (e.g. terminal creeds) but rather the humorous invention of a lively trickery. For example, as *Griever* did with the Chinese story of the monkey king, *Hiroshima Bugi*<sup>13</sup> traces the connections between Native American culture of the Anishinaabe of the White Earth reservation and several Japanese cultural traditions, especially kabuki theater and bushido, samurai martial philosophy. *Hiroshima Bugi* features a very far flung member of the Browne family, Ronin Browne, the child of an Anishinaabe named Nightbreaker and a Japanese dancer. One of Ronin's most important feats in the book is a re-measurement of time according to an "Atomu" calendar that places year zero with the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima.

This Atomu calendar date is marked on Ronin's chest in an "invisible tattoo" that appears only when his skin is flushed, in a sauna or in sexual arousal. The mark that is both permanent and unseen stands for the trauma of the bomb itself or, more exactly, the museums that commemorate the disaster by rendering its victims "invisible." There are several kinds of invisibility at stake here, one of which is the invisibility of misrepresentation. The victims of the bomb are distorted in the museum's miniature model: Ronin objects that the survivors are depicted in soiled clothing while the trees around them have been denuded of leaves. In the actual blast, individuals suffered horrible lacerations and burns, which are not shown in the scale models with the excuses of modesty and taste. Likewise, the museum camouflages the aggression of the war in a bronze pillar replicating letters of peace and good will. As a final point, Shinto shrines are built around war criminals, making them into object of memory-worship, while countless children who died in the blast are forgotten. Ronin chooses an invisible line of

affiliation with the victims, whose ghosts he sees, and likewise forms several socially indiscreet or impossible relationships with a waitress, a crippled veteran, a leper, and a deceased writer, claiming them as his familial community. This method of affiliation, I propose, is a type of postethnicity. If so, then we should not be surprised to find that just as Ronin forms his kabuki troop from misfits and outcasts, his story itself is a fragmented text assembled for us from his scribbled notes by Anishinaabe war veterans living in the Hotel Manidoo. They accept Ronin as Nightbreaker's son, recognizing his "kabuki poses" and bushido shouting as a cultural tie to native tricksterism. Ronin's animal stories and natural images are proof, for the Anishinaabe veterans, of his "natural reason," and his yelling and dancing are signs of his humor. Through these interactions, time and space are rearranged and the relationship network of the White Earth Reservation extends postethnically all the way to Japan.

Ronin's tricks and stunts throughout the novel try to expose hidden injustice, just as his invisible Atomu date tattoo appears as if by magic. He renames the atomic bomb museum "Hiroshima Mon Amour," after the French film that displaces the destruction of the bomb with a love story. He melts the bronze peace letters with acid. But his ultimate trick is played on the stage of national piety. While the perpetrators of Japanese war crimes are venerated as ancestor spirits (*kami*), the victims of the bomb remain unvenerated: "The Yasukuni Jinja is haunted forever by the atomu ghosts of Hiroshima. The shrine honors the warriors, the kamikaze, even six war criminals, but the shrine priests never mention the thousands of children who were incinerated in the service to

their emperor” (148). Ronin stages an invasion of the shrine in the name of the ghost children who should be the rightful objects of remembrance:

I clapped my hands and shouted at the elusive kami spirits of the war criminals. Some out of that shrine you cowards, some out under the torii and face the thousands of children you sacrificed at Hiroshima. The atomu children deserve to be honored more than you or any emperor. Tojo, come out and face my sacred sword or forever hide behind the hakama of the shrine priests and the black shirts of the nationalists. (150-51)

The capacity to make such a challenge, to take a committed stand is, paradoxically, enabled by a postethnically shiftable positionality. *Hiroshima Bugi* moves back and forth between the hotel Manidoo, where Anishinaabe veterans reassemble the stories of Nightbreaker’s son Ronin, and the sites in Hiroshima in which Ronin wanders and teases. The Japan chapters are organized partly by character—as in *Bearheart*, at the center of this novel we have a band of misfits centered around a trickster hero—and partly by location. The Rashomon Gate, the Imperial Moat, Sagami Bay, the Peace Park, the Inu Shrine, the Yasukuni Jina, the Ginza are all locations important to the cultural production of “false peace” and victimry, and each becomes the stage for one of Ronin’s samurai-kabuki poses or tricks that reverse the pompous sanctity of the location in favor of active survivance.

The trickster performance is one aspect of a broader tradition underlies postethnic utopianism and, to some extent, any art that both entertains and teaches. These terms from Horace echo in Miller’s observation that literature’s power comes from its powerlessness: a license to do very real ideological work is given on the grounds of literature unreality, its flexibility. While the separation of art and politics has rightly been

contested, it is precisely by pretending to be apolitical that literature, art, and other trickeries can do political work. The importance of aesthetic effect, such as surprise and humor, was well known to sophists and cynics in the Classical period, who were the playful and tricky opposition of Platonists and, later, the stoics. This kind of clowning shows up again the medieval court jester, which is arguably precisely the role that More's Hythloday would perform at the king's dinner table as he recounts his fantastic voyages. Fooling around creates an opportunity for *parhesia*, inappropriate speaking against decorum or what we might call political correctness.

The closest analog in contemporary culture to the sophist, jester, or trickster is the modern performance artist or stand-up comedian. While much jesting and trickery is a "waste" of scatological nonsense—and Vizenor's *Bearheart* is certainly full of bizarre and upsetting scenes that remain nonsensical—it can just as often be exquisitely precise in its satire. The best example of the kind of performance art I have in mind here is the "post-Mexican" art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña. His description of a performance called "Declaration of poetic disobedience from the New Boarder" illustrates the power of ceremonial rhetoric and the relationship between words, places, bodies, and ethnic identities:

In my techno-shaman-in-drag persona, I walk around the tableau, and throughout the space, erasing the boundaries between audience and performers. // At one point I begin to slowly reveal Emiko's body... until her body is exposed, but her eyes are still blindfolded by the US flag. The acupuncturist methodically follows my path, inserting... forty needle/flags ["representing...nations belonging to the alleged 'coalition forces'"] one by one into her exposed body, leaving the audience with the after-image of a 'colonized' female body/world to ponder. // ...At the end of the declaration, I invite the audience members to 'de-colonize Emiko's body' by carefully removing the flags with the assistance of the

acupuncturist[,] ...displaying the power that each individual has to make a change.  
(2006, 76)

The power of such rhetorical performance is located exactly at the disjunction of language from the world, which is also the seamless unity of language with the world. Somehow, the rather meaningless act of removing a pin can signal a seismic shift in ideas because the pin and the audiences' beliefs have been linked together in a powerful way by the speaker.

In the beginning of part two, I suggested that we could, at least temporarily, distinguish naturalism and the postethnic utopian imagination by their relationship to the world. Naturalism is mimetic, seeking to hold the mirror up to nature. The utopian imagination is nonmimetic: although it is addressed to real people and deals with real issues, it does so in a slanted or indirect manner. However, when we try to delineate this distinction, it quickly breaks down. It is strange to say that naturalism presents the world as it truly is, since fiction is "made up" and even mimetic writers must simplify reality. A world-reducing "as-if" is at work whether the guiding principle is realism, reducing the world to some elements that might well exist, or fantasy, creating a chimerical construct out of a limited set of elements that are more wildly inventive. In one sense, naturalism is about the world as it exists, the ordinary and the every day, the probable. But we cannot then say that utopianism is about the completely impossible. If readers did not think the ideas in a romantic utopia were achievable, they would not be persuaded by them. In the same way, a dystopia loses its power if the evils it warns against are not felt to be a likely threat. Postethnic utopias, too, have to be thought possible or somehow



“true” in order to do their cultural work. Coming at this paradox another way, we can see that although it is utopianism that is supposedly fleeing the real, what makes naturalism work is precisely a distance from the real world. Claims for the value of literary empathy, such those made by Nussbaum, have to do with the impossibility that literature abets: it lets us feel like we can see inside other people’s lives, even their minds. Likewise, what makes fantasy and utopia compelling is its relation to the “real” concerns of “real” people. Ultimately, I think, this is because all writing, regardless of genre or mode, is for another person. Moreover, because it is always to be read at a time after it is written, no matter how present-minded or contemporary the issues are, all writing is in some sense directed towards the future.

We already know that future-direct utopian writing is strongly associated with revolutionary zeal, with radicalism and rupture. This association persists despite the conservative, rather than revolutionary, ideologies of much of this kind of writing. It is also regardless of the situated rhetoric of specific texts such as More’s *Utopia*. This association with futurism and progressivism in the American context is partly due to the “New World” pastoralists who thrived on the discovery and exploitative settlement of America. It is partly due to the “shining city on a hill” ideology, which still stains much public discourse in America. But there are other causes for the association in the wider world, notably the revolutions of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as the future-minded utopianism best represented by Trotsky’s vision of human domination over nature that closes *Literature and Revolution* (2005, 202-205). Additionally, it is a future-minded forewarning of draconian or hedonistic revolutions that we find in Huxley

and Orwell. As I anticipate here the utopias of the future that will be the focus in part three, I should clarify that my interest is not in how certain utopias view the future, or whether they are set in the future. This distinction is analogous to my focus in part two on inventive cartography as a process rather than the produced maps of any one inventor. Leaving behind the spatial paradigm and returning to the temporal one, I remain focused on a postethnic utopian resistance to ethnocentric historicity. That interest has been enlarged, in this section, by novels that illustrate how the utopian imagination resists the demands of geographic fidelity or any other demand to be blindly loyal to a fixed order of things.

What happens when we see the historical narratives of hope and despair as imaginative inventions rather than revealed historical destiny or right-perception of the way things should be? Past-writing novels return us to a sense of perennial possibility, of the past as a time when the future (our present) was not yet determined. In part one, I claimed that any notion of historical progress and decline must give way before this notion of continuously renewed contingency. Now, I have suggested that the postethnic imaginary offers us ways of mapping the vibrant and chaotic world, finding a home in it, engaging it in a mutual act of creation, and seeking out freedom even in dire circumstances. But while such claims have everything to do with hope and optimism, this cannot be the hope of naïve progressivism because progressivism is itself, in most forms, a kind of teleology. Strong belief in the improvement of the world, its perfectibility, is precisely the kind of imaginary homeland Chabon rejects, and it leads to precisely the kinds of terminal creeds that Vizenor taunts and eludes. What does a future

look like when ideologies of decline and progress alike have been rejected? When we draw our maps in pencil, leaving them open to revision, then we have left ourselves open to a future “we” that is “empty” of any prediction or expectation. It is to that future that the third and final part of this project is addressed.

## PART 3 / EMPTY FUTURES

### **Future-Writing and the Prophetic Voice**

Continuing along the temporal axis we have been following, we come now to the writing of the imaginary future. Both the modern sense of historical narrative and the old medieval Christian notion of the millennial kingdom of god have contributed, each in its own way, to the assumption the future might be written in eschatological “utopian” terms. Even though grand-scale revolutionary thinking/doing may be what first comes to mind when we suppose the utopian imagination of the future, I argue now, as in previous chapters, that our utopias have become, of postethnic necessity, fragmented and piecemeal. In postethnic utopias the projection of an imaginary world is an enunciation from a limited (ethnic) position; in situations of asymmetrical political power, these speech acts are “tricks,” methods for talking about social change to the king whose power rests in the status quo. Any cursory survey of the literary-cultural history of utopian writing shows that as monarchy became less relevant, in modern parliamentary politics, progressive utopianism shifted from the remote island to the remote time. Under the influence of modern science, social transformation, and the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, future-writing became more like the work of a draftsman measuring out a blueprint. Utopian jesters like More were replaced, to a large extent, by those whom Popper calls “utopian engineers.” The implementations of such schematic agendas have been so often bloody and disastrous that we are rightly skeptical if not

hostile to this kind of utopianism. There is little left to be said to defend or denounce the ways of thinking that have lead to the guillotine, the gas chamber, the gulag, or the cultural revolution. In this chapter, rather, we confront the most dangerous kind of utopianism, the *future*-writing that tries to enlist our endorsement for a particular, total vision of how the world ought to be. But, thankfully, the postethnic turn manifests a different kind of future-*writing*, which is not a clean-slate projection of tomorrow in the modes of speculation, prediction, or planning. On the contrary, this writing grapples with the implications of living in a world with a future in the wake of a postethnic loss of a monolithic guiding vision.

At no time, in part three, am I particularly attentive to whether a given imaginary future is an astute speculation, just as in chapter one I was not interested in historical accuracy when writers imagine the past. In other words, my concern here is not futurism, although futurism is certainly a kind of discourse closely relate to my topic. Certainly, looking-ahead is vital to society, and futurists who do so serve an important intellectual and cultural role.<sup>1</sup> They do not, however, necessarily give us the literary equipment for living today in a world with a tomorrow, a world in which we know only that an unknown future will be arriving.

It has surprised me, as I organize and revise my readings of these novels, that I have moved backward in time as my topic has shifted toward the future. The first novel in part one, *A Mercy* (2008), is the most recent one in this project. The oldest novels that I include—if we date *Bearheart* from its 1990 revision—can be found here in part three. If I was more committed to a particular kind of genre study, I would have to explain why

a now outdated era of science fiction typifies the postethnic utopian future-writing. That is, I would have to explain why these novels are more closely related to new wave science fiction than cyberpunk or later, more contemporary forms. Perhaps it is the countercultural that draws me to the new wave; if Dick had survived and written into the 1990s, I would have included him here: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, with its meditations on ersatz identity, empathy, and ecological disaster, fits perfectly the themes of the postethnic utopia and my case for it. But already I am pushing the temporal boundary of “post-Cold War fiction” by including Vonnegut’s 1985 *Galapagos*. I will offer a defense of this decision and attend to a related but less problematic concern with the dates of Le Guin’s Hainish cycle in the chapters on each of these writers.

Here, let me stipulate that future-writing is not identical to science fiction, although all of the novels examined in the following chapters are either classified as such or closely associated with it. Science fiction, from its roots in Shelley and Wells to its Americanization by Asimov and Clark, has to do with working out the human implications of technology or scientific discovery.<sup>2</sup> While some of the novels below could be understood as working out the implications of the theory of evolution, I do not frame them in exactly this way. Rather, these novels represent how the theory of evolution, by contradicting mythological creation stories, has profound implications for what we understand about living in a world with a mutable, mutating future. Stuart Hall does not include the Darwinian revelation that man is an animal on his list of forces displacing our former notions about identity (11-12, 1989). But I do: the Darwinian insight that human beings a part of the natural order rather than apart from it, I propose, is

the most important challenge to anthropocentric and ethnocentric modes of identity. Certainly, as Anne McClintock shows us, Darwinism was first co-opted into a colonial agenda characterized by the racism of the “family of man” and the cruelty of social Darwinism (1995, 36-56). This early abuse continues to raise reasonable suspicions, which confront *Galapagos* especially but also are a countercontext for all of these novels. This is because the novelists in this section take up the empty long-term of evolution as part of their future-writing, as a problem and solution to finding the meaning of life. To ask whose imaginary future might really come to pass misses the point, because, to the postethinc mind, the future is empty and available to everyone. The real question is what the consequences are of believing in an empty future and what such a position lets us say about living today.

I am assuming here that there are basically two kinds of futures: the destined future that may be fulfilled and the empty or open future that cannot be known but only welcomed. In the destined future, the purpose of life in the present is to reach a given destination, whether this is the completion of a god’s plan or the full actualization of human potential. In the empty future, there is no goal already set, marked as if with a tape across a finish line. The empty future does not exist as a metaphysical constant in the way that a teleological end, purpose, or potential is thought to exist. One of the major dividing lines, then, in any attempt to categorize imaginary futures must be the writer’s stance vis-à-vis the *end* of time as it marks the *purpose* of moving forward through time. In order to imagine what the empty future means (if it means anything), the novelists in this chapter imaginatively fill it in particular, inventive, and surprising ways. We shall

see that these futures fall along a spectrum from the seriously speculative to the satirically absurd to the fantastic. In every act of imagining the future, however, at stake is what it means to live in an onrushing universe. Hence any act of future-writing touches on, or at least strongly implies, the themes of eschatology. Does the world get better and better until the dialectic of history gives way to a utopia? Does it get worse and worse until the coming of Armageddon or Ragnarok? In the postethnic imaginary, these questions are simply not worth asking because the whole paradigm of progress or decline has been unthought.

Just as we can no longer legitimately represent our past or present worlds only in self-same (ethnocentric) terms, so too we can no longer imagine the future as the destiny of just one ethnic group. For pragmatic, practical reasons this cannot work, and it makes little difference if the proposal was for one group to lead the rest or for the consolidation and homogenization of ethnic diversity. Either scenario is equally insufficient. Nancy's inoperative community is precisely the loss of a parochial group projection into the future under the sign of an *oeuvre*, a great work. In an operative utopian mode, individuals imagine themselves as cosmic workers and normalize their behaviors for the sake of the completion of their work.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, as we have seen in previous chapters, there is a contradicting position that represents the past as a series of contingent events and the present as a negotiable map. Those who entertain or endorse this politico-aesthetic position would not agree that any such metaphysical thing as a god or human nature calls us to a revealed standard. In other words, in the postethnic, nothing like "god" or "history" or "human potential" requires us to achieve a future as it should-be.



In Platonic utopian engineering, Popper has argued, a total vision of the ideal future is required to know the right step to take next in the present (1963, 157). This is why the king must be a philosopher, someone who can comprehend the Ideal. Postethnic utopian futures, however, work something like Popper's view of social logic, where there is not only *a transmission of truth* from inferences to conclusions but also a *retransmission of falsity* from the conclusions to the premises (1992, 75). In other words, we can reject our inferences about the future as false if they lead us to repulsive conclusions about what to do now. Likewise, in postethnic future-writing, the representation of a world to come shapes *and is shaped by* how we think we ought to behave in the present. We will see, in this section, how by entertaining certain futures and certain attitudes towards the future, Octavia Butler, Kurt Vonnegut, and Ursula Le Guin create literary artifacts, manifest perceptions, about living *into* the future, of postethnic identity as becoming-future. We will consider the striking and, to my mind, important differences in each perception in due course. First, we need a closer look at why ethnocentricity, or humanism, is an issue for future-writing. We need to understand the rhetorical mechanisms by which representations of the future have been used or could be used to exhort people to behave themselves.

I recognized this directive as the "prophetic voice," which is approximately what Cornel West means when he espouses "the prophetic" in the forms of "prophetic pragmatism" or "prophetic witness." Reading the Old Testament, West finds that the prophetic "not only put justice at the center of what it means to be chosen as a Jewish people but also made compassion to human suffering and kindness to the stranger the

fundamental features of the most noble human calling,” and the act of prophecy that he calls “prophetic witness consists of human deeds of justice and kindness that attend to the unjust sources of human hurt and misery. It calls attention to the causes of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery and highlights personal and institutional evil, including the evil of being indifferent...”(113-114). West has in mind specifically the writings and actions of Major and Minor Prophets in the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>4</sup> In this practice, the prophetic is not only a way to speak truth to power but also to those disinclined to hear it. That is, through artful language and creative indirection, prophets use rhetorical strategies capturing the attention of a disinterested audience. There is more to prophecy, however, than the kind of performative attention-grabbing that secular pragmatists can admire. There is also a good deal of fire-and-brimstone, and most prophecy can be summed up as a call to return to the true Way of the Lord. Which raises the question, Is the prophetic voice relevant without recourse to some notion of the ethno-religious center to which the wayward listener must return? To put it in terms from West’s definition, can you have prophecy without God or Jewishness? Rhetoric of this kind assumes that there is a “should be,” and the role of the speaker is to close the gap between how people actually behave and the way they ought to behave. West theorizes about the prophetic as if the warnings of the prophets were only figurative devices; many fundamentalists, however, see such visions as allegorical or literal truth, a more or less coded prediction of the “known” future. Whether a warning is a revelation of the future or merely an ordinary prediction of likely consequences, to speak a warning is to speak from a position of knowing what-is-to-come. In the postethnic turn, this very possibility

has been fragmented so that no one point of view can be supposed to know the future for all of us. Yet must we have an image of what the future will or should be in order to exhort people to behave a certain way? If knowing the future is a necessary condition for the prophetic voice that calls us to attention—with compassion, against injustice—then what hope is there if the postethnic future is undetermined or unknowable? Can we know (or be told, or tell ourselves) how we ought to behave in this present world without knowing what the future is supposed to be?

## **Chapter 1: Octavia Butler: God is Change**

Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels imagine the formation of a radical new religion in the face of social catastrophe. The novels are written in a "near future" that is, as we shall see, more speculative in nature than the future-writing of Vonnegut and Le Guin. In fact, the *Parable of the Sower* (1993) reflects post-Cold War social anxieties so vividly that reviewers attributed it the authority of verisimilitude (Dubey and Potts, cited in Philips, 2002, 300). *Sower* tells the coming of age and survival narrative of Lauren Olamina, a young black woman with "hyperempathy syndrome," a psychological condition caused by her mother's use of intelligence-enhancing drugs. Hyperempathy syndrome means that Lauren feels any pain she sees as if it were happening in her own body. This psychosomatic condition, in the face of a world in which the national structures of civil society have collapsed, partially explains why Lauren formulates a revolutionary religion called Earthseed. The doctrines she composes speak directly to the

concerns introduced above, the need for the firmly located (ethnocentric) prophetic voice to say what God want or human nature requires. Lauren as prophet redefines God as “Change” and humanity as “Earthseed,” a life form whose purpose is to “take root among the stars.” *Sower* concludes with the founding of Acorn, a racially diverse intentional community centered in a shared neo-religious belief. The story resumes with *Parable of the Talents* (1999), which is presented as a pastiche of texts by Lauren, her brother Mark, her husband Taylor, and her daughter Asha. *Talents* imagines a fascist “Christian America” regime stepping into the social-political vacuum created by the societal collapse imagined in the first book. The sequel places Lauren’s notion of God in direct conflict with traditional Christian concept of God’s unchanging nature. Throughout, Lauren is clearly a messianic figure, but insofar as she does not call for a return to an unchanging deity, her religiosity is clearly different from the Judeo-Christian tradition with which it is so strikingly contrasted. The flexibility of a shapeable God gives her religion an air of the postethnic; its multicultural pragmatism has appealed to many readers and critics. But, as we shall see, pragmatism and racial diversity does not mean that the *Parable* books offers a thoroughly postethnic idea of the prophetic or the future.

Both *Parable* novels can be contextualized in several closely related traditions. Set in an apocalyptic future of ecological, economic, and social catastrophe, when global communications have broken down and small communities work with simple technology, the novels resemble collapse narratives such as Kunstler’s *World Made by Hand* or Richard Heinberg’s “Letter from the Future” chapter in *Peak Everything*. The *Parable* novels can also be placed, along with Butler’s other fiction, at the juncture of African

American literature, women's literature, and the fantastic: *Kindred* is a time-travel narrative that comments on the legacy or memory of slavery in ways that have garnered comparison to Morrison's *Beloved*; *Fledgling* is a vampire story in which supernatural otherness is used to comment on racial othering; *Wildseed* uses the story of a shape shifter to meditate on the historical transformation of African peoples transported, converted, and changed at the hands of an Other. The racial and gendered reading of the *Parables*, however, is not obviously suggested by the novels themselves, except in the surface details of Lauren's race and gender. As we will note, the novels do touch on racism and misogyny in passing, but their deeper concern is the nature of change, the progress of revolution, and the uses of political power, especially by a charismatic leader.

Thus, although the *Parable* novels are not incommensurate with Butler's continued exploration of the themes of feminism, African American literature, and the fantastic, they are not emblematic of it either. Frances Smith Foster observes that Butler's early novels are not focused on race or racial conflict (1982, 42) and may not have feminist assumptions at their core (38). Both Jerry Philips (2002) and Gregory Hampton (2005) see the *Parable* novels, *Sower* especially, as a critique of deteriorating social conditions under the consumerist systems of late capitalism, which marks racial and gender differences with commoditization—slavery and prostitution. The books would be interesting if they did no more than raise these issues; certainly, gender domination has been richly addressed in the feminist utopian tradition, most notably in Gillman's *Herland* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. I have already mentioned the importance of African American utopianism in Morrison's novels. Yet the *Parable* novels are not

only conventional utopian/dystopian texts or conventional utopian treatments of feminism or race. Through the use of multiple internal texts, *Talents*, in particular, displaces the utopian concern away from either race or gender identity alone. Moreover, Butler's *Earthseed* would seem to make a religious belief out of the postethnic utopian imagination of cyclical, perennially changing chronologies that belong to more than one narrative point of view. In summation, Butler's contribution to postethnic future-writing is a particular ideology of change.

Lauren's dogma that "God is Change" can be seen as the deification of postethnic "empty time" in a radical break with the medieval belief in "full time" already determined by a creator. Because Lauren exhorts responsiveness and adaptability, *Earthseed* appeals to pragmatists. Nevertheless, while the novels reject the ideology of an unchanging god in favor of postethnic, pragmatic engagement with empty time, Lauren does not see fit to let this time *remain* empty. She fills it with a prophecy that humanity, as "Earthseed," is destined to spread to other worlds. The logic of this assertion a major challenge for understanding what the novel might say about living in a world with a future. Living, in the *Parable* novels, is explicitly defined in terms of belonging to a series of organized, centrally defined communities: Lauren's fortified neighborhood, the Acorn collective, "Camp Christian" and so on. We may begin, then, by observing that the novel makes no postethnic assumptions about the inoperative community. As it turns out, Butler strongly indicates that a pragmatic community, as a community of problem-solvers, needs a problem to solve, a work to do. This valuable assertion, which we need not agree with, helps distinguish a pragmatic community from

an inoperative one. A pragmatic community has a particular ethnic location in relation to particular problems—in Butler’s novels, the problem of surviving to reach the stars. This is not a postethnic inoperative community, which would not be centered on communal *oeuvre*. This does not mean that an inoperative community is not pragmatic, only that the problems it addresses are of a different order.

The importance of “big solutions,” and the recurring religious language in future-writing, is related to the apocalyptic (revelatory and eschatological) traditions. The Exodus narrative of escape from slavery and the Gospel promise of salvation in the hereafter have been a major part of American and African American culture, but in different ways. Kimberly Ruffin observes that the Bible “is perhaps the most preeminent written text in African-American culture”(2005, 89) and that Butler’s “biblical re-writing” (88) resembles the critical assessment of Christianity found in African American authors such as Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, Opal Moore, and, perhaps most notably, Alice Walker. In Ruffin’s reading, Butler’s “Afrofuturist” story fuses science and religion, a move which “comes from Lauren’s union of critical thought, scribal literacy, and religious commitment” (95). Although Lauren ironically uses the Bible as a writing desk to pen her own Earthseed verses, the novels imagine “a nexus of religion, critical thinking, and scientific progress [that] suggests that ancient texts, with new readings, can become the framework for human survival” (99). Thus, according to Ruffin, although the *Parables* imagine the rejection of a certain kind of religion, they do not reject religion or religious tradition *per se*. This is the also the conclusion of Donna Spalding Andréolle, who characterizes Earthseed as a reformist rather than revolutionary movement,

“seek[ing] to overthrow those Judeo-Christian values which have lead to intolerance and oppression, and to reinstate a humanitarian faith which returns to Christ’s teachings for inspiration” (2001, 121). That Butler needs to uncouple oppression from humanitarianism begs the question of why the two are joined together at all: in Andréolle’s reading, this is the cultural legacy of “the positive influence of Christian fundamentalism—and more generally speaking Judeo-Christian values—on New World order as implemented in the original Puritan project” (114). The *Parable* novels imagine the power of one religious faith—ethnocentric in its singularity—to rebuild and reform society in apocalyptic times, an image that echoes the Puritan’s vision of the new world and “reinterat[es] Manifest Destiny”(121). According to Ruffin and Andréolle, then, the *Parable* novels do not reject the mono-religious traditions of either African American Christianity or Puritan Christianity. While the former may be regarded as the Christianity of emancipation from sin and suffering, and the later the Christianity of order and righteousness, both of these Christianities are, importantly, monoteological myths. They see the story of human life as *one* story, going from one beginning to one end. Whether the goal is salvation or righteousness makes little difference, since in both cases there is only one truth and only one position that can speak the truth. The *Parable* novels, I propose, attempt to contradict this monotheistic mythology by reimagining an God as change. Change, as Popper shows extensively, is inimical to Platonic notions of the unchanged Ideal. In some ways, Butler is attempting to make the principle of rupture, the utopian “new,” in a fundamental status quo. I write “attempt” because, as the critics above illustrate, the novel’s success in negotiating this paradox is ambivalent at best.



This mixed result arises from differences within the imagined Earthseed religion and between the two novels, *Sower* and *Talents*. Earthseed contains two major components, and their articulation in *Sower* raises important questions about postethnic pragmatism, empathy, and eco-mindedness. First, the central tenant of Earthseed is the often-repeated formula “God is Change.” In *Sower*, Lauren develops this creed in response to life in small fortified neighborhood: she grows up watching people negotiate cooperation for survival. From her singular point of view, survival *is* cooperation, and only intelligent and resourceful being-with can cope with the ongoing threat of chaotic destruction. That is, problems have to be solved from multiple points of view, postethnically. Lauren then creates Earthseed as her particular expression of her point of view: the world will change, and it is a person’s responsibility to survive change as successfully as he or she can. Emphasis changeability and responsibility can remind us of the Native cultural expressions of Silko and Vizenor, but the gospel of change also has connectivist implications, as seen in its principle expression:

All that you touch  
You Change

All that you Change  
Changes you.

The only lasting truth  
is Change

God  
Is Change

I call this connectivist in the spirit of Powers’s revelation that “each metaphor already modeled the modeler that pasted it together” (1995, 328). In the doctrine of Earthseed,

people are both the product and the producers of change. This dogma creates interesting consequences, both for the characters in the novel (bringing them into conflict with mainstream religion) and for the reader. Earthseed's God is not an object of worship, but rather a kind of final term or ultimate fact that must be faced. The purpose of the faith is not to worship this truth, but rather to cope successfully with it:

We do not worship God.  
We perceive and attend God.  
We learn from God.  
With forethought and work,  
We shape God.  
In the end, we yield to God.  
We adapt and endure,  
For we are Earthseed,  
And God is Change.

So, the paradox here is that Butler is imagining a world where many different people have to work together postethnically, but at the same time she is welding them together as a single faith community, an operative community that sees change in a particular way, Lauren's way.

In previous chapters, we have seen that a non-teleological imagination values a free, compassionate connection among people; Earthseed verses such as the one above extend this value in the direction of the future. A non-teleological sense of the past means understanding the world as something other than the product of historical determinism: Roth's young protagonist Philip learned that, in such a world, what matters is paying attention to others and the formation of a certain kind of community in which each member could be a "prosthesis" to another. Likewise, a sense of the present that sees the world as wonderfully indeterminate – available for all kinds of imaginative

mapping—comes to value human freedom and love. Earthseed suggests that, when this point of view contemplates the future, it would do so not in terms of fated progress or decline, but in the terms of adaptation and endurance. Combining “hyperempathy” and a pragmatic gospel of change, Lauren cultivates a particular kind community, which we may admire, but which achieves ethno-racial diversity, and other pragmatic inclusivities, through the communal consolidation of an single ethno-religious position. Her “survivalist cult” seems to fulfill the ideas of postethnic, pragmatic sentimentalism, but only when we limit our conception of ethnicity to particular kinds of identities. There is certainly something attractive about a religious doctrine that teaches people to survive together cooperatively with the widest possible notion of who is eligible to join the community. But Earthseed can only do that by operationalizing the community in service, albeit voluntary, to Lauren’s prophetic vision.

As future-writing, the *Parable* novels embrace of evolutionary change presents radically different articulation of how people move forward in time, but they still insist on the need to know what kind of future humanity ought to work towards. Earthseed defines the terms for success in advance, specifically as the biological dispersal of human life to other worlds, a project that not only survivalist but also expansionist. This is not, on its face, an imperial aspiration, like the galactic empires that appear many science fiction stories. Rather, it is presented as an evolutionary drive: to migrate, to expand, to continue on. We might ask, though, if aside from the (arguable) distinction between the mind’s will and the body’s drives, is there any difference between being an imperial conquistador and an invasive species? That this question remains unexamined in the

novel only makes it more imperative to readers who admire *Earthseed* as a “practical” ideology. It is certainly important that the novel represents humanity as a species that moves forward in time according the laws of evolutionary biology rather than eschatological destiny. The “naturalizing” of people is one step towards postethnicity in the form of a post-anthropocentrism. But the deeper implications of the novel’s expansionism and purposefulness also need to be critiqued.

Butler’s novels help us begin to see how future-writing imagines the world in terms of the passage of time rather than the unfolding of history, but in *Earthseed*, the purpose of humanity is still the accomplishment of a great work, albeit a biological rather than divine one. Thus the question of moving into the future, accomplishing the work of biology or a divine plan (or both), replaces the question of achieving humanity. In this way, any critique of the future is also a critique of the criteria for “becoming human.” The postethnic identity here pushes past the merely nonracist—although this has been important—to insist on the posthuman. The question of a “destiny among the stars” returns as a question of interiority: what, if anything, are human beings destined to become, as individuals and/or as a collective? Butler creates an opening for this critique of *Earthseed* in the multi-textuality of *Parable of Talents*. By giving the story from multiple points of view, *Talents* comes closer than *Parables* to a thoroughly postethnic utopianism. Asha’s critique of her mother’s “positive obsession” shows the ways in which commitment to a supreme mission is not easily reconcilable with commitments to individual people.

*Talents* works through, with no subtlety, the clash between believers in a timeless, destiny-making God and believers in “God is Change.” It is clear that, for Butler, the worship of a destiny-making God brings about oppression tending toward totalitarianism, while the worship of God as Change occasions personal liberty and interpersonal cooperation because these are the best ways to successfully cope with ongoing change. The core issue in *Talents* is the conflict between Lauren’s “paganism” and the belief in the traditional unchanging God of the Christian doxology. The Warner Books edition describes the novel’s antagonists as “violent bigots who consider the mere existence of a black female leader a threat.” At best, this overstates minimal emphasis on race and gender in the text itself. More accurately, Lauren’s enemy is the “Christian America” movement, and it is clear that, while racism and sexism are part of the issue, the real “ethnic” conflict is between two religions. Even though reviews of *Talents* claim that the novel is about racial conflict, Butler herself suggests that it is more about a critique of Lauren as a revolutionary zealot. In an interview for the reading group guide included with the Warner Books edition, she writes that “I hadn’t liked Olamina when I began *Parable of the Sower* because in order for her to do what she was bound to do, she had to be a power-seeker and it took me a long time to get over the idea that anyone seeking power probably shouldn’t have it” (410). By the time she finished the novel, she had grown so attached to the stasis of its resolution that she had difficulty introducing further change in the sequel, even though change is the main tenant of *Earthseed*. The pull towards stasis and resolution, inherent in the novel as a narrative form, frustrated the continuation of the story until Butler began writing a pastiche of several texts presided

over by Lauren's daughter. These texts include Lauren's journals, but also the writings of her husband and brother as well as Asha's commentary. Ruffin sees this dialogic form as key to the *Parable's* integrity, "invok[ing] the kind of critical literacy that Lauren wishes to cultivate with her religion... [i]t encourages readers to see Lauren as a religious leader with human shortcoming and invites multiple interpretations of events" (98).

While this kind of critical literacy works well with the anarcho-syndicalist tone of Lauren's Acorn community, and could potentially give rise to a dialogic postethnicity, it is not clear to me that *Talents* focuses on "multiple interpretations of events" in a way that brings into question the Earthseed's particular and singular ideal for human destiny.

Lauren's principle antagonist and interlocutor in *Talents* is her brother Mark. In many ways, the novel can be seen as a series of pseudo-Socratic dialogs on Earthseed, interspersed with action and adventure sequences. This structure is in keeping with many utopian novels in which we are presented with discursive arguments for this or that utopian ideal. Siding with the "Christian Americans," Mark rejects Lauren not because she is a women preacher (although he does repeat misogynistic Pauline doctrine), and clearly not because of her race. Rather, it is Lauren's "paganism" and the teaching of Earthseed that are offensive to the "CA" status quo.

The important issue here is not whether destiny is set by god or human beings; likewise it makes little difference if the philosopher king uses religious propaganda, such as The Myth of Blood and Soil, or if he proposes an ideal in secular terms. The sense having a greater purpose or destiny *at all* predisposes us to make certain kinds of judgments. Having an already determined ideal located in the future means having a

future-written criterion by which to judge the unfolding present. A destiny is a metric for temporal success for failure, and as an enunciated ideal—because it must have been enunciated by someone in particular—destinies are ethnic projects of the interests or intentions of one particular way of seeing the world. Moreover, any destiny is a teleological story, one that narrates the future from one perspective, the same way that teleological historiography narrates the past. In the *Parable* novels, Lauren's Earthseed destiny is recommended because it focuses human behavior, categorically, on a species-wide, long-term goal. In doing so, it requires a welcome tolerance and cooperation; wars and oppressive governments are not denounced as evil, but rather as inimical to achieving the unified ideal.

Lauren argues that people need a destiny, a “positive obsession,” to structure their behavior, and Earthseed is desirable because it structures this behavior in a productive way. This circular argument holds that we need to behave virtuously (with empathy, critical thinking, democracy) in order to reach the stars, at the same time we need to try to reach the stars so that we will have a reason behave virtuously. This begs the question: do we have to have a temporal narrative, with a goal located in the future, in order to behave ourselves? Already we have examined novels that question whether human beings need a sense of themselves as the intended products of history, and we found a particular kind of ethics in the postethnic imagination of historical contingency, accident, and possibility. We have also asked if human beings need fixed, ascribed ethnic location in the world, and we found that avowing one's own subjective map of the world is as important as being attentive to objective material circumstances. The question now,

raised all along and given focus in Butler's novels, is whether people need a singular sense of what the future ought to be in order to live successfully into it.

Earthseed challenges some aspects of traditional destiny stories by revoking the destiny-making god, putting in its place "change," or temporal contingency and ongoing possibility. But the novels do not challenge the notion that people need someone to imagine a future ideal so that we know what to strive for. Thus these stories are not completely "postethnic" because they do not challenge the sufficiency of a single position to address all the risks, needs, and problems that face human communities. Lauren tells her followers what the future should look like. Certainly, her ethics are attractively pragmatic and libertarian, but these virtues serve of a totalitarian obsession. An alternative kind of prophecy would speak to human behavior not out of a known future, but out of the unknown. The future would be left "wide-open," available for any *arrivant* and not foretold by a prophet who would be necessarily grounded in a particular ethnic tradition. This more radical kind of future-writing might turn on a satirical inversion, presenting a future of progress that is in fact decline, or decline that is in fact progress. In *Galapagos*, Kurt Vonnegut writes that the best future for humankind in terms of survival and happiness might not be the expansionist march of progress that Lauren's Earthseed proclaims. Rather, as we shall see in the next chapter, Vonnegut's novel imagines that humans would do very well do leave their cerebral and celestial aspirations aside. His future humanity dwindles instead of increasing, and fishes among the rocks of a small island rather than taking root among the stars.



## Chapter 2: Kurt Vonnegut: Getting Through This Thing, Whatever It Is

“And how should we behave during this Apocalypse? We should be unusually kind to one another, certainly, But we should also stop being so serious. Jokes help a lot.”

—Kurt Vonnegut at *Clowes Hall, Indianapolis, April 27, 2007* (Armageddon in Retrospect, 2008, 31)

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Galapagos* was first published in 1985, four years before the end of the Cold War. I include it here, in a study of post-Cold War utopian discourse in American fiction, with the following defense. First, *Galapagos* imagines a catastrophe that annihilates the human race, and it is not the only Vonnegut novel to do so during the 1970s and 80s. This fear is an inflection of the threat of nuclear war that shadowed the second half the twentieth century. Although we are still rightly concerned about the proliferation of nuclear arms and terrorist acquisition of fissile material, we are less and less haunted by the possibility of everything going suddenly dark. That version of the apocalypse is germane to the time of the Cold War; and so, in an indirect sense, *Galapagos* is the imagination of post-Cold War life if not a novel of the post-Cold War era. Second, and more substantially, *Galapagos* is one of Vonnegut’s final novels, followed by *Bluebeard* (1987), *Hocus Pocus* (1990), and *Timequake* (1997). It represents a ripening of his humanist position, one that he did not contradict through the remainder of his writing career—mostly speeches, essays, and short story collections—until his death in 2007. That position was vitally outspoken against the hubris of the post-Cold War “New World Order,” and harshly critical of the “neo-Conservative” position in

American politics. It is a voice that offers an important contrast to Butler's version of the future and an important piece of evidence for the emergence of a postethnic utopianism in American literature and culture in the wake of the Cold War. That Vonnegut grew disgusted with status quo and began imagining a way past it as early as 1985 only means he was ahead of the game, as were many other writers in the counterculture and new wave movements.

A million years in the future of Kurt Vonnegut's *Galapagos*, human beings have evolved into a seal-like "fisherfolk" whose habitat is limited to the small island featured in Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Like all the novels in this section, the postethnic here is inflected in the posthuman, although more literally and absurdly so. The novel's proposal that human beings might be better adapted to survival as marine mammals is, of course, satiric on the order of Swift's proposal to eat Irish infants. An imaginary future in which people turn into seals, for the better, suggests that what is at stake in how we view the future is closely related then to how we value identity as human or biological beings. In Butler's *Parable* novels, Lauren redefines human life as "Earthseed," a species whose biological purpose is to "take root among the stars." The *Parable* novels do not question whether humanity is good for the universe; they only propose that human beings can be effectively united in community by embracing an evolutionary drive to survive through expansion. In other words, they do not challenge the ethical necessity of an ethnocentric (anthropocentric) vision of the future in which human civilization works toward a greater expression of itself. In short, Lauren's philosophy is expansionist and domineering.<sup>5</sup> Vonnegut's prophetic voice, like Butler's, hinges on an the articulation of humanity as a

biological species in a world that changes constantly, but Vonnegut adheres to a non-anthropocentric view of a mechanistic universe in which biological life functions according to the laws of natural selection. The fixity of time would be the subject not only of *Galapagos*, but also *Timequake*, the last novel published in his lifetime. While *Earthseed* is survivalist and expansionist, Vonnegut's future-writing decouples survival from any selfish progressivism.

The rejection of a grand intergalactic future is not limited only to *Galapagos*: as Donald Morse points out in the context of *Galapagos* and *Bluebeard*, Vonnegut's novels contradict the norms of science fiction with "a resounding *no!* to any such unearthly faith in populating future worlds" (1997, 293). But even this misanthropic "no" is paradoxically affirmative of human communication. One does not write for people one does not care about. Like the trickster performances of Vizenor and Peña, the "writing" of *Galapagos* is a kind of a slapstick gag: the narrating ghost of Leon Trout claims "I have written these words in air—with the tip of the index finger of my left hand, which is also air" (318). The novel is ostensibly the gesture of a ghost a million years in the future.<sup>6</sup> The novel, then, is a left-handed, "sinister" story that can't exist in any number of ways: it is, according to Peter Freese, "a hoax, a verbal game built on the premise of its very impossibility, and a fictional exercise in alternative history that implicitly denies its constitutive thesis by storifying it" (1995, 170). Comparing Vonnegut's apocalyptic imagination with Bernard Malamud, Freese notes that the act of writing the apocalypse, no matter the tone or attitude of the story, marks a faith in human beings even in the face of ultimate disaster. "By existing and being an imaginative tale," writes Freese, "the

novel articulates faith in the redemptive power of language and the sense-making ability of story-telling, thereby affirming the distinctive faculties of man that it so ironically purports to get rid of” (171). In other words, the novelist has written a very clever novel, indirectly pointing out that humans are far too clever and would be better off as much-less-clever marine mammals. Ultimately, however, Vonnegut must be critiquing one kind of intelligence, the kind that builds and deploys firebombs, while at the same time recommending another, the kind that writes left-handed novels.

Vonnegut comments significantly on Swiftian misanthropy and satirical indirectness in a rejected introduction to *Gulliver’s Travels*, included in *Palm Sunday*. He makes a belated response to a teacher who observed that

...a person has to be at least a little insane to harp on human disgustingness as much as Swift does. And Swift does harp on it long before Gulliver has gone insane. I would tell that teacher now... that his harping is so relentless that it becomes ridiculous, and is meant to be ridiculous, and that Swift is teaching us a lesson almost as important as the one about our not being lambs: that our readiness to feel disgust for ourselves and others is not, perhaps, the guardian of civilization so many of us imagine it to be. Disgust, in fact, may be the chief damager of our reason, of our common sense—may make us act against our own best interests, may make us insane. (1981, 237)

Vonnegut goes on to speculate that many of the atrocities of the twentieth century could be related to an over-enthusiasm for feeling disgust for certain kinds of people. In this model, it is the ethno-parochialism of disgust as well as stingy solidarity that harms human community. Although the protagonists and narrators of Vonnegut’s future-writings mock the ultimate silliness of humankind’s pretensions and cruelty, they also speak to the absolute necessity of and capacity for human kindness and love. According

to these novels, people are disgusting especially when they indulge self-righteous disgust: to be a less hateful person, they say, one must start by loving other people. This openness to others, in postethnic terms, would be founded on an internal recognition of the limitedness, exposure, and fragmentation of being.

This returns us to question of what it means to be human in the context of the “end” of humanity. Vonnegut is thoroughly misanthropic towards bomb-making humanity, and yet deeply committed to novel-reading humanity. The problem, it seems, is the humanity of soulless technological innovation and grand historical purpose: the fault lies not with the bomb, but with the bomb-maker. “We may prefer to blame our nuclear predicament on an unbridled technology” writes Daniel Zins, “but Vonnegut suggests that it is our failure to be fully human that especially endangers us” (1986, 171). This bifurcation appears in *Player Piano*, his 1952 novel in which people are replaced by autonomous processes and machinery to the extent that humanity is rendered redundant and unnecessary to its own projects. *Sirens of Titan* (1959) grants its hero a perspective on humanity that might come from the revelation of an entirely mechanistic universe in which all events are fixed. The destruction of the world by ice at the end of *Cat’s Cradle* (1963) goes hand in hand with the joke inscribed in the title: there is neither cat nor cradle in the familiar pattern of string and fingers. His most celebrated novel, *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969) includes the “accidental” destruction of the universe by an alien test pilot, light-years away from not only the earth but from the events of the novel. In these future-writings, humanity is not essential to the universe, nor are the purposes of the universe necessary to being human.

But the end of humanity is different in the later novels, of which *Galapagos* is the first. The Cold War nihilism of sudden, ridiculous doom is replaced with a posthuman survival, which recalls Vizenor's postindian survivance not only syntactically but also in its unexpected, tricky representation. The slapstick endings of "humanity" only serves to show life is not about identity, or, in other words, our lives may be lived postethnically. The end we must live for is not at the end of time, but rather the end (what Nancy would call that limit) of our own point of view where we interact with the others around us, in proximity. Whereas Butler's novels replace grand divine destiny with an equally grand evolutionary one, Vonnegut's imagination of the future turns more often towards the pathetic limits and painful exposures of human life. These are apocalyptic whimpers instead of eschatological culminations. In other words, in the postethnic future that Vonnegut writes, not only is there no sentient divinity guiding human destiny, there is also no "lasting truth" that can be shaped, appealed to, or invoked as a criterion for good behavior. There is no total Ideal that some may perceive and not others. Vonnegut's view of the universe as contingent, vast, and utterly non-anthropocentric is more radical than Butler's vision of human evolutionary destiny, because Vonnegut's view of the future raises the question of how to live in the universe without a master plan.<sup>7</sup>

It is not difficult to conclude that such novels express a despair produced by their materialist assumptions. This is the critique of *Galapagos* by Gilbert McInnis, based on his observation that the novel replaces "the mystery element of God" with "the chance element in natural selection" (2005, 383). McInnis objects to Vonnegut's "evolutionary mythology" not because it embraces change, but rather because it validates the chance or

random nature of that change with desperate consequences: “If the myth of chance is allowed to govern our beliefs, then there is no meaning to life” (386). In this view, teleological meaning is a necessary condition for virtue. There is no way to decide what counts as good behavior in the absence of any transcendent ideal goal: “when the characters believe in the evolutionary mythology, they live according to it materialistic principles or the chance mechanism of natural selection” (385). McInnis worries that human behavior will tend towards the amorality of animals if we adopt a world view that sees natural selection rather than God’s plan as the shaping principle of human evolution. While he is absolutely right about Vonnegut’s meaningless universe, the consequences for human behavior need not be so dire. A rejection of anthropocentrism means a letting go of teleological myths of human creation and destiny. It is postethnic insofar as most of those myths are ethnocentric productions. The rejection of anthropocentrism can be expressed in the terms of a biological nondualism: for Vonnegut human beings live in exactly the same universe as everything else, governed by the same laws of physics and biology as all other matter.

McInnis objects because he thinks that if we see ourselves as evolutionary creatures to whom only survival matters, sooner or later we stop caring for the weak and infirm. He concludes that in Vonnegut’s version of the universe “the resulting moral order, making individual interest the supreme goal, negates human connectedness to a larger pattern or the human community” (390). This seems so completely wrong on the face of it, given Vonnegut’s ubiquitous affirmations of human solidarity, that it is hard initially for me to understand what McInnis is talking about. I can only conclude that he

means Vonnegut's universe does not contribute to the formation of an *operative* community, apparently the only kind of community McInnis conceives of. This becomes clear when McInnis insists that "Natural selection impels us to reduce all the workings of the universe to materialistic ends, so there can be no mention of "spirit" or any teleological element in science per se" (396). To the contrary, it is specifically for the rejection of teleology and "spirituality" that Vonnegut writes, over and over, the accidental, absurd end of human kind as we know it. It is very easy to see how a glut of such fantasies, which against a belief in divine purpose must seem like a riot of abject humiliation and failure, can be read as a utter lack of faith in humanity. Again, this all depends on what we mean by *humanity* or *human community*. For McInnis, the "workings of natural selection [are] hardly enough to keep a community together" (396), but this is true only of a certain kind of community. We can stipulate that the workings of natural selection do not keep an *operative* community together. But Vonnegut is not rejecting essential, teleological community in favor of abject meaninglessness. Rather, his novels offer, in many ways, the alternative form of *inoperative* community that makes its own meaning despite (or even by) limitations in a material, contingent universe. In this postethnic community, each individual finds their purpose not in the commitment to a future goal, but rather the commitment to those other individuals who presently surround her.

In this way, Vonnegut's apocalyptic imagination contradicts future-writings that use teleological topics of decline or progress or imply essentialist or metaphysically foundational ideas of humankind or human community. This is similar to contradictions



that we have seen previously, but Vonnegut's vision of humankind's place in time is very different from the view advanced by "alternative histories" like Roth's and Chabon's. In alternative history fiction, the work contradicts the notion of a grand historical narrative by imagining that things could be different, i.e. there is no narrative plan being unfolded. Vonnegut's view of time is the opposite: it is not that the sequence of events can unfold in any possible direction, but rather that all the events in all of history are already set in an unchangeable sequence of cause-and-effect. In *Sirens* and *Slaughterhouse* and *Timequake*, Vonnegut creates a prophetic character who glimpses or experiences this unchangeable sequence of events. Yet, several commentators have noted that part of the absurdity of *Galapagos* is that the survivors of human kind come together in random, accidental, or coincidental ways. At first glance, the view of a universe in which accidents happen seems to be in conflict with the view of a universe in which everything that ever happens has already happened. But, although Vonnegut does not, in his fiction, write a future of infinite possibility, neither does he suggest that the "set" future amounts to a teleological progress. In Vonnegut's fictionalizations of time, according to his recurring epigraph, "all persons, living or dead, are purely coincidental." What his imaginary set-in-stone universe contradicts or removes is not the question of chance and pointlessness, as would a doctrine such as Christian Predestination. What it contradicts, instead, is the possibility of grand scheming, such as Butler imagines for *Earthseed*'s manifesto.<sup>8</sup> So, Vonnegut writes a future in which all ethnocentric blueprints are pointless because the death or survival of humanity, or even the end of the universe, cannot be affected by human intentions.

In the same way that Judith Butler's unaccountable self, Nancy's inoperative community, and Chakrabarty's community of proximity find ethical commitments in the lack of stable or foundational identity, Vonnegut's humility before the inhumanity of the material cosmos requires a compassion for all people who are likewise humbled. Because there is no god or grand design that might promise well-being, people have to promise this to each other. For Vonnegut, the message of a mechanistic universe, in which human beings may survive or perish for no divine or metaphysical purpose, can be summed up as "Help is not on the way" (*Palm Sunday*, 184). Which means, generally, that people will have to help each other.<sup>9</sup> Even though many of his fictions suggest that human intention does not matter *to the universe*, Vonnegut affirms that the forms of community we engage in matter a great deal *to human beings*: "Hitler and Lenin and some others...chose abominably, as we know. It matters how we chose" (189). And that choice is not already made for us, by a god or by utopian prophets, but rather must be made by individual people. That individuality, in the wake of several disruptions to former concepts of identity, must now be thought through in postethnic terms. Communities no longer make or break utopia on the merits of their philosopher-prophets, but rather effect compassionate interventions in the spatial proximities, at the limits where each being comes into contact with others.

A teleological narrative, either religious or scientific, usually appeals to us because it confers not only a romantic identity but also a *dignity* in a purpose located in the future. Postethnic identity is not about dignity, but rather limitation, fragmentation, and exposure. People who can commit to a master narrative do so in order to know

where they fit in the master plan. Part of the absurdist humor—the trick or the joke—of *Galapagos* is the suggestion that our place in the grand scheme is as an intermediate form in the evolution of a seal. This kind of reversal and comeuppance shows up again in *Hocus Pocus* (1990), in which a university professor is changed into a prisoner in a jail, and then the warden in a university converted to a prison. Time may be fixed in these novels, but it is not a linear narrative. But this cannot reduce the human beings in his fictions to meaningless pawns of causation because Vonnegut insists, people are not given dignity from knowing their place (ethnos) in a grand scheme: “Giving dignity, the sort of dignity that is of some earthy use, anyway, is something that only people do. Or fail to do” (195). It is the spontaneous presumption of dignity that leads to a compassionate imagination<sup>10</sup> in ways similar to Butler’s “hyperempathy” syndrome and Nussbaum’s emphasis on imaginative compassion. In some ways, Vonnegut points to nothing more than an expanded form of survivalism, one informed not only by evolutionary but also ecological science. Ecologically speaking, postethnicity sees human life as a single node in an interconnected web of living systems. It may be that the purpose of life is no more than to live, and that empathy, cooperation, “seeing dignity,” and so on are only the best ways for sentient beings to use their sentience in order to survive. But pure survival, or life-for-itself, is not enough if it promises nothing more than irresponsible hedonism. The limit of Vonnegut’s satire, the place where the irony fatigues<sup>11</sup> and breaks, is that people cannot behave mindlessly (like seals) if we want to deal with the very complex challenges confronting human, or even planetary survival. There needs to be commitment to the future that is not the same as knowing

how the future is supposed to turn out. Although we might to well to stop thinking in terms of destinies, it would be perilous to refuse to consider the possibilities of risk or unintended consequences.

Vonnegut's communities, then, are non-operative in the sense that they don't require any project or plan, any big-picture or long-term narrative. In *Galapagos*, the posthuman community does not require sentience at all; we can read this as a satirical comment that sentience is only useful in certain ways, and superfluous or deadly in others. The question, though, for we who do still have our big brains, is how to use sentience in a way that *commits* to the future in a way different from the sentience that would seek to *determine* the future. The making of this commitment is the work of postethnic future-writing. Any ethnocentric future-writing, even when the ethnic "we" is drawn as widely as possible, cannot help but try to determine the future. This is true even if for no other reason than that the "we" tends to implicitly be restricted to "we the living." Any truly post-ethnic future would also have to be post-present. That is, it would not be conceived only in terms of those alive today (not that we can even do that much). Rather, it would be a future that is also imagined by those who have yet to come, those who are still arriving, the unmet and the unborn. Vonnegut has us meet the seal-people of the future only to shake us up, to remind us that we do not know who we may become.

Is this radical openness, this unknowing, too exhausting for us to live with? Can we continue to care for one another while at the same time always leaving some open door, somewhere in our minds and our lives, for the *arrivant*? Vonnegut says, as clearly

as I think any writer has, that caring for others is not a problem of epistemology. He repeated, on several occasions, an aphorism that his son Mark wrote to him in a letter in 1985. He recounted it for the last time in his final speech in 2007: “I asked Mark a while back what life was all about, since I didn’t have a clue. He said, ‘Dad, we are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is.’ Whatever it is.... Not bad. That one could be a keeper” (2007, 30-31). Although in other speeches and novels, Vonnegut imagines a world in which all events past and future were already fixed, this is not the projection of a purposeful universe—and importantly, should not be considered a sincere statement of metaphysical belief, not from a jester like Vonnegut. Imagining that the absurd, ridiculous, or accidental end of the universe is already given, Vonnegut is able to write about living without the comfort of committing to a guaranteed metaphysical project, an identity. But although, in such a universe, right and wrong cannot be defined as they conventionally are, against a standard of judgment based on an monoethnic ideal, Vonnegut tells his readers that there are still criteria for knowing good actions from evil. We do not have to know “what it is” or “what it should be” to decide that we will help each other get through it. Which says also, I think, that we do not have to know whom we are through and through, which is knowledge that Judith Butler convinces me we will never have. Even if we do not have an identity project to strive for into the future, there is no reason that we cannot be each other’s purposes. Thus, Vonnegut’s non-anthropocentric universe is so only in the sense that human beings are not the center of creation. It does not mean that human beings cannot be important for each other, the center of our concerns and affections.

*Galapagos* may be Vonnegut's most nuanced statement of this theme, since it writes a future of human happiness that depends on evolving away from certain human qualities. The best hope for human beings, in the novel's satiric logic, is to stop being human. Natural selection depends on the development of durable mutations, and *Galapagos* plays with the idea that the evil in human beings is less durable than the good. It is, of course, not serious to think that we would be better off as marine mammals. But it is the shock and absurdity of this non-serious vision that makes it effective as a postethnic utopia. Whereas Butler's *Parable* novels participate in the prophetic exhortation to an ideal, Vonnegut's wacky impossible apocalypses make use of prophecy's penchant for stunts and showmanship. Both Butler and Vonnegut prophesy a need for human beings to get along together. Although each has some non-postethnic traces, both writers empty the future in one way or another. In any case, the postethnic cannot itself be a particular program, only a diversity of programs. Butler's fills in an empty future with a celestial agenda, composed in the circular logic of a galactic destiny. Vonnegut, on the other hand, pictures an empty future through the conviction that human kind does not matter at all to the universe, and so the only thing that we can commit to is each other. Both writers develop an ethos of compassion/empathy and pragmatism, albeit for very different reasons, by creating "new" futures to replace the old, familiar, ethnocentric narratives of apocalypse. To round out our examples of postethnic utopia, though, we should consider future-writing less connected to actuality. After all, the postethnic imagination of the future cannot be limited to speculating on the effects of current causes, because this only goes so far in opening up the future to what cannot be

anticipated. Because fragmentation and opacity are, as I argued in the introduction, important characteristics of the postethnic utopia, the postethnic future must exceed connections to the known by suggesting the potential arrival of something that none of us sees coming. In other words, it sometimes requires a utopian mode that is closer to the fairy tale than science fiction. Such is the mode of Le Guin, who, we shall see, is also committed to human compassion, yet in a way distinguishable from both Butler and Vonnegut.

### **Chapter 3: Ursula K. Le Guin: The Ecology of Soulmaking**

If one is a stickler for detail and “continuity,” as many fans of fantasy and science fiction tend to be, then Le Guin’s science fiction is not as “fairy tale” in nature as, for example, *Star Wars*, which bears no relation to the actual planet earth or human history. The “Hainish cycle,” as most of her science fiction has come to be called, is set in a consistent imaginary universe that is connected, especially in early novels, to our planet Earth. Most of the novels, however, are set on distant and very different worlds, either populated by or in contact with human beings who were planted throughout the galaxy by a common ancestral race, the Hainish. More exactly, the ancestors of the Hainish did the seeding, and in the time of the novels, Hainish Historians work to rediscover the various colonies and civilizations their ancestors fostered. To this end, the Hainish establish a cooperative, loosely structured group called “the Ekumen.” The notion of an interplanetary government is a familiar science fiction trope, most recognizable in *Star*

*Trek*'s "Federation." The Ekumen, however, is distinguished by a particular kind of political imagination based on egalitarian curiosity. It is this curiosity, I propose, that makes the ecumenical future a sufficient cause for committing to the unknown-to-come. Le Guin considers, with more deliberation than is widely appreciated, the effects that the vastness of time and space might have on the ideology of a very old race like the Hainish. By considering several works from the Hainish Cycle, we can see that such fantastic future-writing can do prophetic work similar to, yet importantly different from, novels such as Butler's and Vonnegut's

As I mentioned briefly at the beginning of part three, the dating of Le Guin's fiction requires some comment. The main body of the Hainish novels are written during the 1960s and 70s. Many of these, and especially *The Dispossessed*, are cited by Tom Moylan as examples of a then-new critical utopianism. While I will mention some of the pre-1989 novels in this chapter, my ultimate focus is an overlook trio of stories in the 1994 collection *Fisherman of the Inland Sea*. These "churten" stories deal with the ways in which we require interactions with others to form a working sense of the world around us. These interactions, seen in the Hainish cycle as a whole, are thought to take place in a loose confederation of open-ended affiliations, a postethnic ecumenicalism. It is worth noting that Le Guin last added to the Hainish cycle in 2000 with *The Telling*.

By focusing on the Hainish stories, I am setting aside other branches of Le Guin's prolific writing. There is the fantasy branch, the *Earthsea* novels, and the "teaching stories," a series of fabular young adult novels including *Gifts* and *Powers*. There are several conventional literary works, often called her "California Fiction," and at least one



widely regarded performance poem. Le Guin's writing, as a whole, repays attention to its remarkably consistent eco-feminist ethos, but it is her science fiction that offers the best expression of how this ethos confronts time, space, and human community. Like Octavia Butler, Le Guin has often been noticed as a writer who uses the "metaphors" of fantasy and science fiction to articulate a feminist critique or project. In several essays, Le Guin makes it clear that her project aligns with feminism in several integral ways. But it seems clear to me that the Hainish novels have done the most to systematically work through multiple categories of identity, rather than remaining focused on gender. Le Guin's future-writings interpolate a community of postethnic kinship, committed to human well-being, that draws its energies from the very lack of a knowable, transcendent human nature.

Le Guin's fiction has often explored the importance of dreaming, especially the ways in which the ability to dream unreal things marks an ability to change things as they really are. We have already seen the importance of imaginary spaces to the living occupation of actual spaces. The places we live in are as much imaginary as they are actual: our homes are both brick-and-mortar and the beliefs we have about them. One early novel, the *Lathe of Heaven*, is a prolonged meditation on this very theme. In that story, George Orr discovers that his dreams have the power to change reality. But this discovery only occurs when Orr falls under the influence of his psychiatrist, who can direct Orr's dreams with hypnotic suggestions. As *Lathe* follows the development and exchange of many possible worlds, Le Guin is able to comment on the futility of utopian scheming that uses manipulative or coercive means. It is this rejection of the

masterminded utopia that Jameson cites as an example of the impossibility of imagining utopia at all (2005, 293-4).

The power of dreaming is also invoked, and theorized, in *The Word for the World is Forrest*, which tells of the colonization of the Athsheans—short, green, furry human beings—by Terrans, humans from earth. Aside from the color and stature of the “aliens,” the general storyline of ecological exploitation and native insurgency is echoed in the 2009 film *Avatar*. One difference, which will become important to Le Guin’s postethnic ecumenicalism, is that the little green Athsheans are not entirely nonhuman. They are a very distant, divergently evolved product of the Hainish diaspora. Before their contact with Terrans, the Athshean society has no interpersonal violence. Given their nonviolent culture, they suffer passively under colonial domination by Terran settlers who harvest their planets ubiquitous forest to supply lumber to an ecologically desolated Earth. The novel tells the story of a successful violent uprising lead by an Athshean named Selver, who is often referred to as a “god,” although the novel does not make clear until the end what counts as a god in this particular culture. At the end of the story, as the Terrans depart, an ambassador from the Ekumen asks Selver why incidents of murder have appeared for the first time in Athshean society. He replies,

Sometimes a god comes... He brings a new way to do a thing, or a new thing to be done. A new kind of singing, or a new kind of death. He brings this across the bridge from the dream-time to the world-time. When he has done this, it is done. You cannot take things that exist in the world and try to drive them back into the dream, to hold them inside the dream with walls and pretenses. That is insanity. What is, is. There is no use pretending now, that we do not know how to kill one another. (168)

This statement offers an interesting gloss on the importance of the imagination and pragmatism to effecting social change and also facing up to those effects. Selver's "dream time," much like the dreaming in *Lathe*, is the imaginative "world" of fiction but also the "imagined relationships to lived conditions" of Althusserian ideology. In terms of Scarry's thesis that the imagination counterbalances pain, something must be needed to ease human pain before it is shaped in the mind's dreaming imagination and artficed into actuality. Once made actual, in the world-time, this new thing becomes an ongoing part of human action and interaction. To appreciate the "reality" of dreams does not mean losing perspective on the reality of the world, it only means having a nondualist model of reality in which dreaming is a "real" thing that "real" people do. Selver's speech insists that dreaming is a real and crucial part of how newness enters the world. The interaction between the dream-time and the world-time is heightened by the story's setting—a planetary forest—and the agrarian-pastoral society of the Astheans. In pastoral terms, the novel's comment on the nondual connection between ideas and the world is strategically set in a hyper-naturalized world, one in which the all the world is all "country" with no "city" to be found.

This brings us to Le Guin's pastoralism, which has important implications for the postethnic imagination, if we can take rural and urban, agrarian and technologic identities to be kinds of ethnicities. Andy Sawyer suggests that Le Guin's science fiction is closer to the pastoral than the arcadian, precisely because it uses the teaching methods that I have been describing as part of the prophetic voice. Whereas Arcadias, in the Virgilian tradition, according to Sawyer, create "self-consciously other region[s] that could be used

by sophisticated artist for a sophisticated audience under a guise of simplicity” (2006, 399), the pastoral “explores imaginative effects to didactic ends” in a way that “oscillates between metaphor and pseudo-mimetic creation” but “eschews allegory” (410). As we noted above, the future-writings of Butler and Vonnegut are more explicitly tied to actual human history than Le Guin’s, but as Sawyer sees it, history in imaginative literature does not have to be actual in order for the work to thematize living in a historical world or a world with a future. “A fantasy history,” he writes, “may not connect the fictional world with ours, but the story itself is often to do with history itself: the passing of an age, or a sense of time.” The creation of a sense of very long time in Le Guin’s Hainish novels marks, then, a departure of innovation from the pastoral in the direction of science fiction, since “Pastoral...is rarely historical: it is ‘out there,’ out of time, isolated” (414). I would add that the population of this long time line—the human diversity of the Ekumen that exceeds the recording keeping capacity of the Hainish Historians—makes this a postethnic future. Le Guin’s postpastoral, which connects to the historical world and is not isolated outside of time through idealized conventions (nymphs, shepherds, etc.), echoes the “new pastoral” described by Glen A. Love:

The redefinition of pastoral, then, requires that contact with the green world be acknowledged as something more than a temporary excursion into simplicity which exists primarily for the sake of its eventual renunciation and a return to the “real” world at the end. A pastoral for the present and future calls for a better science of nature, a greater understanding of its complexity, a more radical awareness of its primal energy and stability, and a more acute questioning of the values of the supposedly sophisticated society to which we are bound. (1996, 235)

The didactic pastoralism that Sawyer finds in Le Guin, with its emphasis on living historically in the world in a particular way, closely tracks Love's description of a redefined, critical pastoral. Notably, Love is explicitly moving the pastoral away from the sophisticated city/simple country motif characteristic of the sophisticated artistry "under the guise of simplicity" that Sawyer attributes to the classical form. This shaking up of city/country identities is, in a sense, a postethnic move.

Sawyer's key example is a novel closely related to *The Word for the World Is Forrest*, one that illustrates how the "more acute questioning of the values of supposedly sophisticated society" unfold along eco-feminist lines. *Always Coming Home* is set on a fantasy future earth and tells the story of a young woman taken from her native society, educated in an urban center, and released to return home again. The novel contrasts modern-technological civilization with primitive (for want of a better word) traditional society. In relating the movement between these two contexts, Le Guin evokes the pastoral town/country paradigm, as Sawyer explains, but also makes an epistemological comment on frames or ways of knowing. The totalizing cyber-knowledge in the city, relayed via computer networks in virtual space, contrasts with the localizing knowledge of tribe and settlement, grounded in the crisscrossing paths and trails worn into the land. According to Alice Jenkins, not only does the Keshian practice of greeting everything in the world—rocks, trees, and people—with the word "heya" indicate a worldview counter to the abstract knowledge of the city's cyberminds, the novel's focus on the physical journey gestures toward an appreciation of "embodied" and "local" knowledge. Jenkins observes that both Butler's revolutionary hero Lauren and Le Guin's less epic protagonist

are travelers who walk the land, and by paying “a principle attention to the physical facts of long distance walking and its effects on human bodies and minds,” both novelists represent, in fiction, the ways in which a feminist “understanding of the situatedness of knowledge includes attention to a variety of factors, including a recognition of the impact that embodiment and the relationship of the knower to other knowers may have on the prosecution and validation of knowledge” (2006, 322). This final point, on the relationship between knowers, is helpful because it points toward the mind/body split that must be undone to some extent in the postethnic utopia. This is partly because bodies and embodiment offer several ways to resist the total, operative utopian engineering of the philosopher king. Plato’s idealism dismissed material reality as imperfect, and yet it is bodily imperfection (again, our refrain of limit, exposure, fragmentation) that calls us to a compassion and hope for each other. Attention to the lived, embodied experience of the singular being, and the recognition that that experience is incomplete and unable to see a total picture of itself or the world, is the beginning of postethnic inoperative community.

We should pause briefly to note that embodied knowledge runs throughout all the novels we have considered, even though those novels may not be framed in any obvious ways by feminist counter-epistemologies. In *A Mercy*, the telling of Floren’s story is not only the cognitive work of rememory but also the physical labor of inscription on the walls of her closet—reaching the door to the closet, she has literally as well as figuratively written to discover her line of escape. In *The Plot*, the sum of Philip’s coming of age is the ability to become a prosthesis to those around him—rather than the

autonomous disembodied or essential sovereign subject that conventional bildungsroman produce, *The Plot* produces a human being whose subjectivity is contingent upon the bodies in proximity to itself. In *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*, Meyer Landsman chooses the familial home of his wife's body rather than the idealistic messianic homeland of Zionism. Vizenor's trickster uses bodily tricks and teases, along with transgressive and enthusiastic sexuality, to live wildly and survive. In *Galatea 2.2*, it is the lack of the experience of a physical body that separates Helen from a human reader; and in *Plowing the Dark*, the imagination shapes and is shaped by the body's position in virtual space or a prison cell. As Jenkins explains, *Earthseed* can be read as the story of a bodily progress *walking* towards the future; but also, Lauren experiences the pain of others in her own body, due to her hyperempathy syndrome. Vonnegut's *Galapagos* suggests (with deep irony) that the key to human happiness lies in a change in human bodies—from the “big brains” to something that lives with an animal's balanced naturalism. In these novels, taken together, there is very clearly a knotting together of the issues of temporal perspective, literature's place in society, and humankind's (bodily) place in the world. All of these subarguments can be configured as movements away from total identity, which trend I have been calling the postethnic. Although these fictions can be arranged on a temporal axis, as I have done, and doing so reveals how each contradicts the ideologies of teleology, this contradiction does not exhaust their revolutionary energies. The stories concern the myth of purposefulness in time insofar as this myth has consequence for the way people live bodily in the world. That is, in resisting ethnocentric narratives, historicism, or grandiose destinies, these novels return

their readers to the here-and-now, even if they do so by the indirect method of imagining fanciful “nowheres.” This attention to the here-and-now is also a quality of situated knowing which is both cognitive and physical. In other words, even this centrism is exceeded in a post-Cartesian identity that is neither all-body nor all-mind. This scattered and fragmented attention is refracted through many identity positions in each singular being, and then multiplied again in the interactions between many singular beings. Moreover, if these postethnic interactions are a “literature,” then the web they form would be a literary ecology.

In this way, when we reconfigure these novels of postethnic utopianism in terms of embodied knowing, we can also incorporate the redefined or postpastoral as an occasion for the practice of a complementary reading strategy. This ecology is defined on the jacket copy of Glotfelty and Fromm’s *The Ecocriticism Reader* as “the study of the ways that writing...both reflects and influences our interactions with the natural world.” In the spirit of the new pastoral, we would have to insist that “natural world” is a tautology, but the phrase is useful in light of the ubiquity and persistence of a modern-pastoral mode that divides the artificial town from the natural country. That division mirrors, in important ways, the division between the artful mind and the natural body. And so the epistemologies of embodied or situated knowledge are, for many writers, post-Cartesian and predisposed to an attention to the natural world in a way that resists the simple subject-object duality of old-school pastoralism.

The postethnic nondualism most pointedly at stake in Le Guin’s fiction is the continuity of the world we dream with the world we live in. In other words, our



experiences and interactions are not centered in the waking or dreaming worlds, but in their interplay. This continuity is explored most directly in a trio of short stories collected in *The Fisherman of the Inland Sea*. These “churten” stories imagine the effects of an invented technology, one that completely frees a person’s location in time and space from the confines of actuality. Of course, as throughout this study, I use ethnicity to name located identity, and hence this churten stories are an experiment, in my reading, of a radical postethnicity. In the introduction, we saw that there are several objections to postethnicity on the grounds that it would isolate individuals from needed relationships and traditions. In the first of the churten stories, we see chaos resulting from such a radical severing of place, a nonlocation or nonidentity. In the second and third stories we have, instead, a postethnicity that is reinforced by interactions with others, what the characters call entrainment or “dancing.” Thus it is a process of identification that operates through both a postethnicity and a consubstantial interethnicity.

We have already seen the relationship between the world we live in and the way we use language to create imaginary maps of that world. Le Guin’s churten stories build on the same theme:

Having the name [churten], I plunged into the experience, and spent quite a lot of time, good time, too, on the vocabulary. I needed words to demonstrate fictionally what instantaneous travel, transilience, might feel like, finding out in the process that what it feels like is the only explanation of how it works, and that where words in themselves are inadequate, syntax can take you straight to another world and home again in no time. (1994, 9)

We should notice, here, that this account of the creation of the churten stories touches on the issue of language and the world in telling way. Certainly, words are inadequate. Post-structuralists tell us that words do a very poor job at connecting us to the real world: language is a closed system, a prison house, a labyrinth. But, when words are fitted together in syntax, something else seems to happen. Such articulation can, Le Guin implies, take you both “to another world” and “home again.” (Is it too much to think that this play within and between words is like the play within and between people I have been arguing for?) It is precisely the detachment of language from the real world—the detachment of signifier from signified—that allows for this kind of travel. If language really did connect referentially to things in this world rather than “metalinguistically,” to other verbal constructions, then it could never point anywhere else. It could only point to the real in a very narrow and restricted way. But language is not restricted: writers can create names, like “churten,” that do not refer to any “real” thing. And this ability to indicate the unreal gives language, or more specifically literature or fiction, significant power. Such freeing up of language can also be the freeing up of identity to be a process rather than a fixed product.

In the churten stories, experimental flight crews experience strange phenomena after making the instantaneous jump to other worlds. Le Guin summarizes them,

All three churten stories are also metafiction, stories about story. In “The Shobies’ Story,” transience acts as a metaphor for narration, and narration as the chancy and unreliable but most effective means of constructing a shared reality. “Dancing to Ganam” continues with the theme of unreliable narration or differing witness, with a hi-tech hubristic hero at its eccentric center, and adds the lovely theory of entrainment to the churten stew. And finally, “Another Story”—one of my very few experiments with time travel—explores the possibility of two stories

about the same person in the same time being completely different and completely true. (9-10)

In the first story, the crew experiences different versions of reality as they momentarily lose touch with each other. The second story is a cautionary tale in which an egocentric explorer construes himself as receiving the kind of welcome among a “primitive” society that echoes and comments on many accounts of colonial exploration, especially Cortes’ posture as a returning god. The hyper-masculine Commander Dazul creates a wish-fulfillment perception of the world around him from his point of view alone, and he lives in it alone, blind to the world as others see it. As it turns out, the reality of the situation is starkly different when seen from the point-of-view of the native population, who believe the captain has made a traditional pilgrimage to their land to die in a ritual sacrifice. Commenting on the captain’s death, a crewmate speculates, “No, I don’t know if had anything to do with the churten effect, with perceptual dissonance, with chaos. We came to see things differently, but which of us knew the truth?” (157). The defining premise of the postethnic utopia—its core difference from utopias of total social engineering—is that no one of us can have the whole truth. In the third churten story, a young man working on churten technology, transported back into his own past, is able to live his life both having left his home (to work on churten theory) and having remained there, marrying and keeping house.<sup>12</sup> Taken together, these stories tell us that shared acts of imagination define the world we share, our places in it, and even who we are. More importantly, they do not do so against the measure of an absolute narrative like god’s will or human nature.

There is no ethnocentric “way the world should be,” only the postethnic ways in which we imagine and cause it to be.

This makes the perception of injustice as unnatural an act of invention. Future-writing can represent the future as something-to-be-invented, rather than as a something-to-be-realized or -fulfilled. If living towards the future is a matter of inventive discourse, then we can devise an ethics without a blueprint or an ideal world. That is, we can make it up, piecemeal, as we go. Butler writes a species-level ideal as a way to forge a species-wide community; Vonnegut writes a universe in which human kind can be definitely said not to matter, as a way to contradict the hubris that leads to human suffering. But both these future-writings are limited and do not fully account to the ways in which an empty future rejects progressivism and risks hedonism, a lack of responsibility to the future. Le Guin’s future-writing avoids these problems because her future is very long and very strange, and so becomes an occasion for curiosity. She marries the postethnic and the interethnic in a thoroughgoing nondualism. (This cannot be unrelated to her personal Taoist beliefs.) Her future is empty because there may dwell there forms of living that have yet to be invented—a future in which lives will be invented, but postethnically, not according to a philosopher’s Ideal of essential human identity. It is a future in which people may become androgynous (on the planet Gethan, in *The Left Hand of Darkness*) or marry in sets of four (on the planet Io, *passim*), or experience any other number of mutations and permutations. They may invent and abolish slavery (on Werel and Yeowe in *Four Ways to Forgiveness*), or achieve an anarcho-syndicalist revolution (on Anarres in *The Dispossessed*). There may be a secular revolt against a mystical tradition in which

both the secular and the mystical are at turns corrupting and healing (on Aka, in *The Telling*). The writing of the Hainish Ekumen imagines that all of time and space can be made a “home,” but only if the diversity, strangeness, and mutability of human experience is not only fully accepted, postethnically, but enthusiastically loved. Le Guin’s most extensive description of the culture on Hain itself, aside from hints in the churten stories, is the novella “Man of the People,” part of the *Four Ways to Forgiveness* cycle.

Although the Hainish are imagined as the oldest and maybe originary human culture, Le Guin does not imagine life on Hain as a hyper-advanced, techno-utopia. “Man of the People” is an imaginary biography of a Havzhiva, a Hainish “mobil” who comes to play a key role in the ending of slavery in the Werel-Yeowe system. But, even though Havzhiva is supposedly an eminent “Historian” of one of the oldest and wisest human cultures, the first section of his biography imagines him growing up in a “pueblo” called Stse, in a traditional animistic culture that features, among other surprising characteristics, a coming-of-age ceremony in which a wedding couple become “gods together.” After three years of education in the Hainish school at Kathhad, training to be a Historian,

Havzhiva knew that everything he had learned in Stse, all the knowledge he had had, could be labeled: typical pueblo culture of northwestern coastal South Continent. He knew that the beliefs...of the different pueblos were entirely different one from another, wildly different, totally bizarre... and he knew that such systems were to be met with on every Known World. (146)

At first, Havisha is angered that the historians kept the “truth” from the people in the pueblos. He assumes that there is one truth, that the Historians are like Plato’s philosopher king who knows the truth but keep the people in ignorance. He is upset that the people in the pueblos choose to live in ignorance of the truth the Historians know. But his teachers correct him, and he comes to understand that “Local knowledge is not partial knowledge. There are different ways of knowing” (147). In other words, local knowledge may only be fragments, but that does not mean that somewhere there is a whole. What the Hainish know is not the “truth” of history, but only the vast, fragmented and diversity of human experience. This is clearly presented as consequence of perceiving how long time can be: “For instance... historians did not study history. No human mind could encompass the history of Hain: three millions years of it... What the historians mostly did was explore, in an easy and unhurried fashion, the local reach and moment of the river [of time]” (145). These historian-explorers move throughout the known worlds with “no motive in these contacts and explorations other than curiosity and fellow-feeling. They were getting in touch with their long-lost relatives. They called that greater network of worlds by an alien word, Ekumen, which mean ‘the household’” (146). This movement is the connective tissue of most of Le Guin’s science fiction: her readers visit her novels in much the same way the Hanish historians visit the worlds imagined within them. Their movement forward to the next world is not for the sake of consolidating a whole. Rather, this living towards the future is a postethnic way of being-together in time that is distinct from the consolidation and erasure of individuality in a communal project. “All I did was go learn in Kathhad what I couldn’t learn in Stse,”

Havisha concludes at the end of the story, “What the rules are. Ways of needing one another. Human ecology” (193).

An ecosocial ethos, this human ecology shares important characteristics with the compassionate communities described by Octavia Butler and Vonnegut. It is also familiar to us from the communities written into the other novels in parts one and two. We may even say that the postethnic utopian imagination distinguishes itself from utopian engineering by the creation of this very ethos. This is a postethnic process of identification that cannot sacrifice people in the present for the sake of a future ideal, because the purpose of living, in this view, is located in the living beings presently existing all around us. But it does give rise to a curiosity about other people and a concern for their well being, both of which are located in a realization of one’s own postethnic condition, one’s own fragmentation.

This fragmentation makes Le Guin’s prophetic voice slightly different from the other novelists in part three, each of whom is different from the Jewish prophetic tradition that Cornel West identifies as a useful paradigm for contemporary advocacy of human rights and social justice. All forms of future-writing, however, can be called prophetic insofar as they call for attention to human well-being from a disinclined audience. But the traditional prophetic voice, according to West, calls for reform by exhorting conformity to either the will of God or an essential Jewish character as the chosen people of God. Butler does not prophesy that God has any plan for humankind – in her novels, God is change and will inflict all of the meaningless sufferings of chaos on people who do not actively seek to “shape” God. Butler does, however, ground her call

for pragmatic survivalism in the common project of a shared human destiny—Earthseed depends upon the ideal that human kind has one important role to play in the universal scheme of things. It is this ethno-religious ideal that Vonnegut writes against when he imagines a universe in which humanity matters very little. For Vonnegut, there does not have to be a grand purpose, realized in an eschatological culmination or “end” of the universe, for people to act with caring attention to each other and the world. We can, instead, commit to “help each other through this thing, *whatever it is*.” But Vonnegut’s biting absurdist satire can grow wearisome, suffering from irony fatigue, and it can be hard to care about people seen through a misanthropic lens. His imagination of a fixed universe in which human caring matters precisely because all else is pointless does not strongly motivate a commitment to the future; it is just as likely to remove the future from consideration. If the universe cannot be effected by human actions, there is no reason to make counterfactual wishes: what will be will be. While this kind of fatalism brings a kind of peace, it does not help us motivate the kind of transformative action that will be needed to mitigate ongoing risks to planetary survival (climate change, epidemic disease, nuclear proliferation, to name a few). To motivate a commitment to the future, we have to have an interest in it, but at the same time we need a kind of interest different from the interest of utopian engineering, the vested interest in total control. We need a compassionate investment in other people and the future, and this kind of tie can be cultivated through postethnic curiosity and “fellow feeling” for a vast and wondrously mutable humanity—structured by neither a transcendent deity nor an essential human nature—as imagined in the Hainish cycle.



The Hainish view the universe as the Ekumen, the household, and it is from this Greek word that we get our terms ecology and economy. In this view of things, ecologists and economists (concerning both monetary and textual economies) are kinds of housekeepers. This housekeeping ethos attends to human beings as part of a world, and so it is not merely concerned with social or ecological justice, but rather “ecosocial” well being. Moreover, it is the well being of everyone in the household, a community defined postethnically by proximity rather than identity. Whereas traditional prophets may have called for a return to an unchanging transcendent or essential measure of righteousness, Le Guin’s prophetic voices calls for an attention to the ever-changing world around us. That literature is suited to do this work is the basic assumption of Kenneth Burke’s essay “Literature as Equipment for Living” and also Le Guin’s “carrier bag theory of fiction.” That our literary artifacts are part of our world and not (only) reflections or representations that stand apart from, I propose, is the most revolutionary claim for a “literary ecology” or ecocriticism that attends to the ways in which writing shapes and is shaped by living. “A book holds words,” Le Guin reminds us, starting like Sartre with the phenomenological. She continues, “Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us” (1996, 153). While there may be some poststructuralist misgivings about the phrase “words hold things,” she has chosen this metaphor less for its theoretical precision and more for the female connotation of the container, the non-phallic. Le Guin is right that novels “bear meanings” and literary arrangements

(economies) are about the relations not only between words, as poststructuralists would agree, but also between words and people. She insists that

Science fiction properly conceived, like all serious fiction, however funny, is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people related to everything else in this vast sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story. (154)

We have already considered many, theoretically diverse, differently committed and aligned ways to reach this same conclusion. It recalls Lina making up her own pastiche of beliefs in *A Mercy*, and Philip learning how he relates to those around him in *The Plot Against America*. It recall's Chabon's imaginary creation of a homeland of choice, Power's connectivism (which he attributes uniquely to fictional discourse). The native paradigm of ceremonial magic, in Silko, and trickster stories, in Vizenor, are also ways of maintaining and challenging the sociocultural balance. Additionally, Le Guin's metaphor complements, expansively, the prophetic novels of Butler and Vonnegut, finding in the mutability of human existence neither a call to impose a destiny nor a bleak existential absurdism.

This is the future in the postethnic, ecosocial imagination: not something to be known, nor something to be produced, but rather something to be prepared for, to invent, and to explore with open curiosity. The attention that is paid in the terms of an ecosocial imaginary must be the attention to the existant world. (This must include not only that material world, but also real immaterial objects, such as works of art, problems, theoretical paradigms.) In other words, rethinking a utopia postethnically would mean

not only letting go of foundational or essential ideas about human identity, but also a naturalizing of discourse in a difference sense than the reification of ideology. It would take an existential-pragmatic view of experience and perception, or society as communication, and see linguistic discourses as secondary to the discourses of living. It would take a new, post-anthropocentric kind of attention to human beings as natural creatures, an attention that is the answer *and* demand of impending environmental and social catastrophes looming at the start of the twenty-first century.

## AFTERWORD / ON UTOPIA, ECOLOGY, AND HOUSEKEEPING

In the preceding pages, I have offered evidence that utopia has gone postethnic across representative American novels in the late twentieth and early twenty first century. I have argued throughout that our utopias can no longer be formulated or pursued only within or from the exclusive perspective of any one identity position or ethnicity. The recognition of the fragmentary limitations of our interior experience of self and our collective experience of society means that we must of necessity pursue any program for betterment in a piecemeal rather than “total” fashion. In this afterword, I retrace this main argument, which has stitched together a series of subarguments about history, naturalism, and the future. That my claim should be refracted and transformed through each temporal scene is itself a consequence of the argument, that is, my position that no one point of view can tell us what we should know, who we should be, or how we should behave.

As I retrace my evidence for this thesis, I need to provide two further clarifications about it. First, the fragmentation of poststructuralism is open to a charge of astructural bias. If no one point of view is structurally privileged as the philosopher king of the world, then it may seem difficult to imagine what we can do to resist those systems that continue to oppress human lives. This doubt is an echo of the suspicion that postethnicity robs us of the ethnic grounds from which to stage our revolutions. But this choice between being or becoming is a false one, and from what I can see, the postethnic

can be either revolutionary or reformist partly because it approaches the question of structure and action differently than these alternatives suggest. In the introduction, I offered the allegory of a housekeeper in light of Chakrabarty's proposal for a theory of fragments without a whole and the ongoing practice of proximity that would be the politics of such a theory. This figure should be held in contrast to the utopian engineer, the master architect who wants to draw up blueprints, build upon solid foundations, and someday cease working when the building is complete. This architect is a logocentric, masculinized, and product-orient representation of what it means to try to improve the world's being. We can now begin to oppose it with a poststructural, feminized, process-oriented paradigm of the housekeeper who tends to the world's becoming. This, then, is my second point, for which I take the next few pages to enlarge and support: because it assumes a never-whole process of identification, postethnic utopia can be theorized through the economic, ecological, and ecumenical chores of keeping house.

When we have ruled out, through theoretical argument or direct observation, identity as a stable and essential possession, what remains is a process of identification that occurs in the numberless connections between singular beings. We can call these connections "literature," as Nancy does, if by literature we mean a broad practice of symbolic interaction through human artifacts including literary texts. These interactions are generally future-directed expressions of, as Scarry names them, counterfactual wishes. In the postmodern, globalized world of the late twentieth century, such wishes can no longer credibly be made only for the sake of a community of others held to be identical to oneself: oneself is estranged from oneself, and one's community comprises

many different kinds of others who, we assume, are themselves likewise limited and circumscribed by history. If there is any common identity, it is difference, but even so there are different kinds of difference and open-mindedness serves as the guiding principle. As Butler puts it, reading Adorno, “Our responsibility is not just for the purity of our souls but for the shape of the collectively inhabited world” (110). That we are all in the world together and all faced with the similar if not identical experiences of being singular can issue a call for compassionate interactions that “participate in the remaking of social conditions” (135). Yet that participation must be contingent, without one master architect in charge: it must be Karl Popper calls “piecemeal” and not “utopian” engineering. It can even be as small, in *The Plot Against America*, as a zipper for a pant leg. It can be as large, in *The Parable of Sower*, as a new version of God. But even when it is very large, it will not be total.

With the help of the preceding novels, I have argued that a rethinking of community and utopia would occasion a rethinking of the human as a natural creature, and that an attention to human beings in the natural world would lead us to an ecological framework in general. Such an ecology is both the alarm and the response to global risks and challenges in the postmodern, postindustrial world. Accordingly, Jameson’s *Seeds of Time* links the utopian and the natural together through the altered temporality of what is “natural” in postmodernity. First, the temporality of the world is affected not only in terms of space-time compression but also in terms of what we recognize as the passage of time. Back when time moved at a medieval pace, “items descended so slowly to acquire a patina that seemed to transform their contingencies into the necessities of a meaningful

tradition” (1994, 11). To this sense of continuity and growth, Jameson contrasts the hectic pace of modernity, in which “even the past comes to seem like an alternative world” rather than the predecessor of the present (11). Indeed, we can now rupture the patina of reification with an unnatural utopian imagination, as when Roth can imagine America’s greatest generation swept up in Nazism. The temporality of modern production, Jameson continues, isolates us from the cyclical-linear temporality of nature: “our seasons are of the post-natural and postastronomical television or media variety,” because we watch the weather on TV and attend to fashion seasons more so than the actual felt conditions of our ecosphere (17). Powers describes such a feeling, being lost in the virtual reality of the cave, but also explores how even so we can arrive back in the (natural) world through the mystery of contact with other people.

Artificial nature, according to Jameson, stifles revolution by giving us alteration without change: “where everything now submits to the perpetual change of fashion and media image, nothing can change any longer” (18). As time stops, the spatiality of the world is homogenized and made available to ownership: “it is a peculiarly ambivalent mystery that mortal beings, generations of dying organisms, should have imagined they could somehow own parts of the earth in the first place” (25). This hubris gives voice to cataclysmic proclamation in Lina’s story about the eagle, the claim of ownership that causes the eagle’s eggs to fall and the chicks to live on alone. In the capitalist utopian imagination, nature is transformed into real estate. Change is no longer change, and land is no longer land, because these categories of space and time have now become fashion

and property rather than what I can only call existential categories for the process of identification named living experience.

To resist this does not require some naïve back-to-nature pastoralism such as the environmentalism inscribed in colonial images of the “Indian,” which Vizenor’s *Bearheart* mocks and teases. It is rather a recognition that utopian engineering architecturally degrades every kind of lived environment. “The disappearance of Nature,” Jameson writes, “now begins to sap its other term, the formerly urban” (28). Any meaningful change in the social environment, then, would entail a change to both the urban and the rural. In the same way, Le Guin shows how the postethnic ruptures not only races and identities, but all dualisms that could be mistaken for the one true axis of the world. Urban identity and rural identity, and their cognates, are localized, decentered, deposed, and post-ed along with all others. We can no longer imagine the good only in terms of the social or the environmental, anymore than we can hold legitimately an idea only for the interests of one particular segment of humanity. Postethnic utopianism upsets, ruptures, displaces identity wherever and in whatever form it tries to settle down. The process of identification never stops, never reifies, but continues on ceaselessly at the limits where singular beings meet each other.

In the postethnic, global situation, nature returns to us as both a problem and a solution. Ulrich Beck’s theory of cosmopolitanism based on shared risk is useful here. “How,” Beck asks, “can coexistence in multi-religious, multiethnic and multicultural societies work,” and, moreover, “can Western societies obtain realistic, non-utopian, namely disappointment-proof” solutions to such a question?”(2002, 71). If we accept



piecemeal and compassionate cooperation as a sufficient form of coexistence, then we can very likely obtain a postnational or postsolidarity commonground in the context of shared, globalized risks such as environmental crises. Beck includes, importantly, risks that I consider ecological but which are not traditionally associated with “green” environmentalism, including migratory labor, human rights, and pandemic diseases. (But I do not know if even this proximity praxis will be “disappointment-proof,” a criterion of the architect who wants to know if the building will stand up forever.) Any problem that does not respect identitarian boundaries (national, cultural, racial, etc) can be grounds for postidentity coexistence. The shared earth is both a problem, because we cannot ignore what appears as the other’s crises, and also a solution, because we can pledge an affirmation of co-suffering and hence co-operation. Thus compassion and proximity respond through praxis, and not the authority of paternalism, leadership, or the commands of a detached theoretician. Does this mean that our global community becomes coordinated to the extent that it cannot be called inoperative in Nancy’s sense? It could only be so if we limit it to the human community (and even then it would be unlikely). But this is generally untenable given that the risks which cross national and ethnic boundaries tend to affect the whole of the natural world and not just people.

Thus ecology and postethnicity can each recommend a cosmopolitanism of one kind or another. “A postethnic perspective,” David Hollinger tells us, “is alert for opportunities to construct global solidarity capable of addressing ecological and other dilemmas that are global in their impact” (2000, 12-13). Of practical necessity, then, the ecological can be a productive way to think about the intersection between a non-

essential view of ethno-identity and a non-foundational view of utopia. Both “antifoundationalism and its distant gendered cousin antiessentialism,” Jameson observes, “in effect turn centrally on the question of Nature” (1994, 33). The ecological, biotic world offers both a ground for the inoperative community, a paradigm for personal wellness, and an occasion of political urgency and call to action. Whereas existentialism projects the refutation of metaphysical certainty into the interior of our individual beings, pragmatism projects the refutation of objectivist foundational epistemology into our interactions or discursive practices. Certainly, existentialism in its Sartrean formulation places too much emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility without due attention to limits that material, historically emergent circumstances place on individual experiences and capacities. A better account of unfreely chosen community can be read in Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes* if we understand Indigo as a kidnapped cosmopolitan, who nonetheless survives postethnically through the resilience of her perennial imagination, her ability to cultivate a new allegiance to Hattie without forsake her older, tribal allegiances.

I do not want to overemphasize the instrumental value of the postethnic. I am warned here by the abuses of the pseudo-pragmatist motto to “do what works.” This operational motto has had its ruthless applications: one recent example has been former American Vice-President Dick Cheney’s apologia for the use of torture. I maintain that such amorality does not represent the core realizations that both existentialism and pragmatism can offer, a non-foundational, anti-essentialist invitation to choose opportunity or hope. These approaches are future-directed and emphasize our ability to

make something good, or at least better, of ourselves and the world. Pairing a kind of loose version of each of these traditions allows us to unite the personal and the interpersonal, the private and the public, the social and the political in a unified non-metaphysical ecology. But this materialism does not, surprisingly and importantly, result in a mechanization of human life as a mesh of chemical or physical processes. This is the point of Vonnegut's extended joke in *Galapagos*—that what is “good” for humans might not be the same as what is good for their “big brains.” In this way, human identity is embodied as much as it is a quality of the Cartesian *cogito*. When the essentialist or foundational props have been knocked out from under all Western epistemic platforms, what we are left with are both a crisis and an opportunity. Into this occasion steps literature.

In the introduction, I argued that Scarry's theory of the artifact allows us to rethink utopianism as a material inscription, the codification of our compassionate sentience and counterfactual wishes. One could easily see how this act of sharing the world could be thought to lead inevitably to cooperation for a better world: Sartre certainly makes this leap when he claims that no true writer could write against human freedom (1991). Scarry does not make this jump, however, and explicitly resists relying on literary humanism to improve human behavior through the process that Rorty calls “sentimental education” (1999, 73-74).<sup>1</sup> In “The Difficulty of Imagining Other People,” Scarry insists that goodwill fostered through literary contact with the other is not enough: we also need laws that make it difficult for people to harm each other. And if we can only have laws or sentiment, then laws would be better albeit less powerful than both

forces taken together (1996, 107). This inclusion of constitutional rule—an operative form of community—is not a rejection of the inoperative, existential-sentimental model, but rather a point that reminds us how the discursive artifact is a broader category than literature. Scarry reminds us that while literature may create a sensory world in the mind of the reader, and this may indeed do significant work towards creating a shared intersubjective world, other non-sensory writing also articulates the world we hold in common. In fact, in *The Body in Pain*, her ultimate example of a counterfactual discursive wish is the rendering of an award in a civil suit: it is an express wish that harm had not been done. Scarry thus points us to the limits of literature even as she explains the substantial powers of discursive world-formation.

I return here for a closer look at Scarry's theory and its implications because we need to define very carefully the intersection of ethnicity and utopia on a nonmetaphysical ground. Carelessness here can lead to an "astructural bias" that silences political action with a mix of Romantic sentimentalism and case-study particularism. Scarry's counterfactual wish offers us a way into the intersection of the non-foundational and the non-essential, the pragmatic and the existential, because it marks the material inscription (in artifact or discourse) of the possibility of a desirable alternative. It locates the utopian at the moment of discursive interaction, and it is the interactionist version of pragmatism that most informs my rethinking of literature and community. If we understand pragmatism as a kind of amoral practicality, we cannot reliably avoid crimes and outrages that ostensibly "work." The kind of pragmatism I find more useful is the socially conscious (if often conservative or reform-minded) version that takes as its

starting point the interactions of individual people. When these interactions are linguistic—discourse, I should clarify, is not limited to the interlocutive in this model—then they can be named “symbolic.” Interactionism works well with the recurring claim that what we read and write has consequences for the way we live. We can say concisely, if too simply, that literature is “symbolic interaction among singular beings.”

If not pragmatism in general, then certainly the interactionist tradition insists on starting with material immediacy. This rules out the position of the pragmatist like Mead, who hold that consciousness of the world determines our existence. Norman Denzin’s call for a political interpretive interactionism is helpful here; he aligns this methodology with “Marx, Mills, Sartre, and the Critical school” for whom “human consciousness does not determine existence; nor does existence determine consciousness. Between consciousness and existence resides communication and culture” (1992, 164). This nondualism would resist, on the one hand, a historicist overestimation of the powers of ideological systems, such as capital, which might produce a fatalistic apathy. On the other hand, it resists a Romantic-existential overestimation of individual freedom to choose regardless of very real and powerful systems that do exist, albeit not as metaphysical constructs but rather as certain habits of interaction. Denzin rejects non-interventionist interactionism (162) on the grounds that “Despite its imagery of the free human agent, the interactionist self is free only within the constraints set by the ecological collective order” (163). This means that just because culture is made up of individual interactions, we are not required to critique culture astructurally on a hyper-individuated level. Roth’s novel imagines this paradox vividly, as the slide into

American Nazism is represented through as series of individual choices in particular relationships reiterated to a national scale. The distinguishing if fine point is that for the interactionist, the structure that limits choices is made up of other choices, other people's interactions. As Powers would say, in the language of connectivism, it is the "model modeling the modeler." Persons, viewed postethnically as singular beings, and collective human community as a literary articulation, are thus mutually-shaping, consubstantial entities. We cannot believe exclusively in the power of either the personal or the structural, but instead we must balance our interpretive critique ecologically between them. While we might apply such analysis to all manner of discourses, my examples here have all been of one particular kind of interaction, the novel. When we add to our existential theory of literature an interactionist theory of interpretation, what emerges is the literature's embeddedness in the world, or literary ecology.

Thus ecology comes to our attention from several directions. It involves a new sense of community that we have from Nancy, but with a particular attention to the articulation of a being together, the interactive network by which an inoperative community is constituted. If those points of communication each depend upon a set of linguistic conventions—a common language—then we will not get very far postethnically speaking. That is, we will still be relying on language mastery as a measure of discursive participation, the act of contributing to community. The postethnic utopian perspective assumes that everyone can work out her counterfactual wishes with anyone; the person's identity as a speaker of a particular language is subject to the same rupture as every other kind of identity. (National identity, at one point, was tied to

language, and to some extent still is.) Here, language is not a product to be possessed. Just as we rethink identity as a process of identification, so too we must rethink language as a process of enunciation. This not only opens up participation in discourse, it also opens up an opportunity where there is a need—a gap, a rupture, a pain—for compassionate invention.

If we claim too blithely that our language constructs our reality, then, as Stephen Yarbrough has argued, we leave ourselves no opportunity for new ideas or experiences to enter our world. He proposes interactionism as a non-constructivist *and* non-conventionalist stance hinging on the claim, first made by Donald Davidson, that there is no such thing as language (2006, 9-11). What this really means, Yarbrough explains, is that communication does not depend upon both interlocutors having a shared language in common. I would add that neither is a shared identity, of any kind, a prerequisite. What is needed is only that leap of “interpretive charity” (xii), of faith that, as Nancy and Butler tell us, we take as much for our own sake as for the sake of the other.

When we have revised our idea of community so that its sufficient condition is the contact among limited beings, we see that interaction is another word for discourse *that does not assume language or even humanity*: “‘discourse’ is... purposeful interactions between and among people and things. In this sense, the hermit crab manipulating an empty shell to determine whether to adopt it as its new home is engaged in discourse” (2006, xiii). Discourse (again, including but not exhausted by literary discourse of the novel) can be a name for that third space between experience and consciousness, which includes the experience of other consciousnesses, e.g. when we interact with other

people. As Denzin points out, it is not simply the case that one conditions the other.

They are, according to Yarbrough, entangled by definition because

...in our interactions with things in the world, including our intercourse with others using signs, we and other things in the world mutually condition one another: when anything or anyone does anything, including when what they do is speak, write, or gesture to me, these interactions becomes part of the situation to which I can respond, just as I can respond to any other stimulus. Discourse is part of the world in the same way that an organism is part of its environment. Remove an organism from an environment or add an organism to an environment and you alter the environment.... (14)

This relationship between what we could rename the individual and society is imagined postethnically in recent novels, several of which I have offered in this project. In particular, each of these novelists imagines a new kind of community in which all the member of the community and their immediate (proximate) surroundingss shape one another. The relational web of living systems is well known to environmental science. And following this line, Yarborough proposes that an environmental-interactional model of discourse leads importantly to a discursive nondualism:

...Understanding an organism is to understand its interactions with its environment. In the same way, there is no difference between the way I understand, for instance, this desk at which I sit, and the way I understand these marks with which I write about this desk. There is no difference between the laws governing how I can use this desk and those governing how I use these marks to interact with you and this desk. (14)

This nondualism dovetails with what I have been calling a non-metaphysical or materialist approach. There are two important consequences of adopting such a view of discourse: first, as Yarbrough points out, “Of these pragmatic claims, the most important is that we must believe that there is but one world, a world that we can share” (xiii). But



if there is only one world, then how do we account for the difference, in literature, between the natural and the fantastic? A novel about a horse makes one kind of sense, and novel about a unicorn appears to make a different kind of sense. If there is not one real world of material facts and a separate world of ideas, then how can we account for our awareness of the nonexistent unicorn? If we are to maintain a nondualist or ecological model of discourse, we must include another interactionist claim, that our ideas are real. This is Popper's claim for "world 3," the world of art and ideas. "I assume," he says, "that there exist immaterial inhabitants of world 3, which are real and very important; for example, problems" (1992, 9). In other words, although the horse and the unicorn are not the same kind of real and we will not be able to interact with each in the same ways, they are both actually part of our discursive ecologies.

What catches my eye here is an intersection between Dewey's notion of society as communication, Nancy's inoperative community, constituted through communication and not communion, and then again the intersection between interactionist emphasis on points of contact with Nancy's emphasis on the shared limits at the boundaries of each singular being. The interactionist community and the inoperative one seem, to me, to be much the same thing, with the important expansion that interaction offers to widen our sense of community in a non-human direction, an opportunity that Nancy leaves open by eschewing "human" being.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, I maintain, when the writing of our utopian stories becomes inclusive or postethnic, then our social imaginations become both inoperative and ecologically minded. That is, we undergo what Yarbrough defines as an ethical shift, a move that "changes in our apperception of social relationships" (155). The

most important of these shifts are, in his analysis, the cause for invention, for the “new” that is also central to utopian theory. Relationality emerges here as the principle factor, as Nancy tells us that community is a spatial relationship. In Chakrabarty’s terms, our communities might be based on our *proximity* to our neighbors rather than our *identity* with them. This proximity and neighborliness, this spatial and ecological mindset, seems to not only open our utopian imaginations towards other groups of people, but also other things that live or exist in our community broadly defined, that is, our ecosphere.

Every novelist in this study has been concerned in one way or another with the natural world. In Morrison’s *A Mercy*, Lina’s resolution to piece together her own identity is associated with her housekeeping duties, which include a companionable chicken that nests in the kitchen. Roth’s *Plot Against America* imagines the Nazification of American life through the imprint of a swastika over stamps commemorating the national parks. Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes* is as much about different ways to cultivate of human community as it is the cultivation of a garden. Chabon’s Sitka Jews are shaped by the cold and isolation of Alaska. Powers’s virtual reality “cave” is as much about the perception of the world as representation as it is the representational powers of artificial systems technological and artistic. Vizenor’s tricksters rely on a natural reason that is something other than noble savage environmentalism. Octavia Butler’s survivalists must live close to natural cycles in a recognizable agrarian ideal, while Vonnegut imagines human beings drastically reintegrated into the natural world through evolutionary transformation. Le Guin’s novels are more anthropological than ecological, but they represent the location of human community in a nonhuman material order that structures

and sustains human life in a myriad of forms. Certainly, these novels are not nature writing, nor are they ecological utopias. Yet they all follow the track of inoperative community in returning human beings to the web of living systems, a move that, I propose, is the ultimate extension of the postethnic turn.

Keeping in mind the broader sense of literature as symbolic interaction, what these novels offer is a postethnic literary ecology. This would not be merely a theory tailored to nature writing, or even an ecocriticism that focuses critical inquiry on ecological problems. Rather, it would be an ecological theory of literature, of symbolic interaction as one kind of discourse within living systems. The word ecology is felicitous here to my concluding remarks as it originates from the Greek *οἶκος*, or household, which also gives use our terms economy and ecumenical. Economy, here, retains not only its fiscal sense, but also a stylistic one, a textual economy. Of special importance is the figure of the housekeeper, the *οἰκονόμος*. The practice of housekeeping, of arrangement or ordering of things in spatial proximity, is, I think, our best model of critical, process-oriented, or “pragmatic” utopianism. It contrasts with the architecture of blueprint utopianism: a building may be “finished,” but the chores that make life livable within it never are. As the conditions of postmodernity bring us into unavoidable contact with every kind of person, our postethnic household expands until soon we will most correctly think of it as the planet itself. It becomes imperative to communicate our utopias across ethnic lines not only because it lets us encounter the other, but also because it allows us to cultivate critical solutions to transethnic problems and, thus, teaches us how better to keep house.

## NOTES

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### PREFACE / REFOUNDING UTOPIA AFTER IDENTITY

<sup>1</sup> Schillinger illustrates his point with the case of “Marcel Theroux, who was born in Kampala, Uganda, and now lives in London [and who] has produced a post-apocalyptic fable called *Far North*, written in an American idiom but set in Siberia. Its net effect recalls Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, Jack London’s *White Fang*, and *The Road* by Cormack McCarthy.”

<sup>2</sup> Anderson notes the creation of academic chairs in history as part of a new understand of the novel’s “empty” time as also “serial” (194). In other words, in pre-modern Christendom, when time was “full” (fully ordained by God), the future could affect the past, as when “types” of Christ were thought to have occurred in the Old Testament. In empty time, the events of history are thought to occur as a “series of causally related events,” like the plot of a novel.

<sup>3</sup> One well-known example of this phenomenon is the apocalyptic title image of Rachel Carson’s movement-defining *Silent Spring*.

### INTRODUCTION / UTOPIAS, IDENTITIES, COMMUNITIES

<sup>1</sup> Popper writes that “Plato’s work...was meant by its author not so much as a theoretical treatise, but as a topical political manifesto” (153).

<sup>2</sup> As always, the righteousness of ideological conservation is based on the doxology-like authority of the past. I mean here, specifically, *the Doxology*, a short verse which is sung by the congregation in many Christian worship services: “As it was in the beginning/is now and ever shall be/world without end/Amen/Amen.”

<sup>3</sup> On the necessity and impossibility of disentangling personal utopian “riffs” and the objective, scholarly study of other people’s utopian discourse, see Levitas “The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society” (2007, 47-50).

<sup>4</sup> This is the position of Engels in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. (1970)

<sup>5</sup> “That is why we always propose to speak of a democracy *to come*, not of a *future* democracy in the future present, not even of a regulating idea, in the Kantian sense, or of a utopia...” (1994, 81)

<sup>6</sup> See also Keith Booker *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* (1994). Booker makes an interesting claim, in a note, that dystopias neither critique the status quo nor warn of a future that might come but rather critique a contemporary utopia – a contemporaneous hope or idea, expressed or implied; he does not expand on this idea, but one could easily see *1984* as the nightmare version of National Socialism and *Brave New World* as the nightmare of Fordism, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Pordzik attributes the term to Moylan and to Foucault with no distinction between the very different uses each makes of the coinage (2001, 1-4). Moylan addresses literary representations that are heterotopic, whereas Foucault uses the term to name materially occurring spaces that mix different categories of experience, e.g. a cemetery that spatially relates the living to the dead.

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth recalling here the impossibility of knowing the future and the ethics of that impossibility outlined by Derrida at length in *Spectres of Marx* and underlined with the statement, “without this experience of the impossible, we might as well give up on both justice and the event” (82).

<sup>9</sup> This necessity of seeing the present as a possibility rather than an inevitability is precisely what Paulo Freire means when he writes, in the context of the pedagogy of critical literacy, “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in process, in transformation... A deepened consciousness of their situation leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation. Resignation gives way to the drive for transformation and inquiry, over which men feel themselves to be in control, if people, as historical beings necessarily engaged with other people in a movement of inquiry, did not control that movement, it would be (and is) a violation of their humanity” (1970).

<sup>10</sup> Vaihinger groups utopias with “schematic fictions,” (2000, 24-27). Although the as-if method is generally optimistic about the power of fictive language to find real solve real problems, Vaihinger never intends to reduce the world to a fiction. On the topic of total theory, he tells us “the desire to understand the world is therefore ridiculous, for all understanding consists in an actual or imaginary reduction to the known” (171), i.e. the world is bigger than the images we can hold in our heads. This humility before the world is precisely what the most dangerous kind of utopian revolutionary lacks.

<sup>11</sup> One such reduction is Edward Steichen’s a pan-cultural photography project *The Family of Man*, the insufficiency of which Hollinger describes in *Postethnic America*: “Steichen’s pictures of Asians and Africans growing up, marrying, and struggling through their adult lives at work and at home *seem to reduce* the population of the globe to a set of mirrors for the narrower world of middle-class liberal males of Steichen’s milieu. Steichen...achieved a specieswide view by *limiting the range and depth of human differences*.” (1995/2000, 53, my emphasis).

<sup>12</sup> The language here recalls Kwame Anthony Appiah’s well known “Not Universalists or Pluralists: The New Cosmopolitans Find Their Own Way.” And indeed, Hollinger goes on to connect the postethnic and “rooted cosmopolitanism” (1995/2000, 5).

<sup>13</sup> Take this passage for example, which articulates an exceptionalism as the result of attentive observation to the specificity of historical circumstances: “Within the population of the United States today, blacks are the only ethno-racial group to inherit a multicentury legacy of group-specific enslavement and extensive, institutionalized debasement under the ordinance of federal constitutional authority. Indian also have a strong claim for special treatment, but the legal standing of tribes as sovereign entities invites, and indeed provides the basis for, a differently configured response to the historic mistreatment of Indians” (176-177). Whatever we think of the claim, we cannot say that the writer has conflated the two histories of oppression here.

<sup>14</sup> Nussbaum’s *fancy* is mostly empathetic, but it has its utopian qualities from time to time. For instance, “We see it in the ways of contemplating possibilities for political change—for even when the ways of the world are ‘stony,’ fancy can imagine a garden growing there” (40).

<sup>15</sup> In an key passage in *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha extends “contingency” to mean not only temporal give and take, but also spatial contact: “The contingent is contiguity, metonymy, the touching of spatial boundaries at a tangent, and, and the same time, the contingent is the temporality of the indeterminate and the undecidable” (1994, 267). Spatial contingency more often appears, in *Location of Culture* and at large, as liminality, as in: “What is striking about the theoretical focus on the enunciatory present as a libratory discursive strategy is its proposal that emergent cultural identifications are articulated

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at the liminal edge of identity..." (256). This liminal edge at which we make contact is what Nancy calls the limit of our experiential-perceptual horizons as singular beings.

## PART 1 / ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES

<sup>1</sup> It goes almost without saying that the Eden myth continues to have consequences for belief and behavior in the US, for example in debates over teaching evolution or legalizing gay marriage.

<sup>2</sup> Because of prevailing uses of the term *alternative* in the context of anti-traditional progressivism (e.g. "alternative lifestyle"), we tend to feel that calling conservatism a form of "alternative" utopianism is oxymoronic at best. I myself often fall into the habit of combining the terms *conservative* and *progressive*, *normative* (ideal) and *subversive*, *status quo* and *alternative* in the conventional pattern.

<sup>3</sup> On the importance of Beowulf as a fantasy story (with monsters) rather than a historical record of Anglo Saxon life, see Tolkien's "Beowulf, the Monsters and the Critics," reprinted in *Poems and Stories* (1992). The revision of literary history, and the cultural politics of such revision, could of course offer enough examples to fill another chapter. Epics and novels serve as foundational cultural texts as much, albeit in different ways from, historical records or governing documents. Imaginative writers can wonder what we would be like if our literary history had as one of its cornerstones not the story of Jane Eyre, but rather *The Story of the First Mrs. Rodchester* (a working title for what Jean Rys would call *Wide Sargasso Sea*). Or if our mythic founder was not Aeneas, but rather his Latin wife Lavinia, as is the proposal in Ursula Le Guin's *Lavina*. Le Guin's literary contradiction, like Rhy's novel, seeks to "make a life" for a woman at the margins of a literary-historical ur-text (whether it be an ur-text of "western civilization," or an ur-text of feminism). These kinds of interventions also offer a counter-history, doing similar work as *A Mercy* and *The Plot* through the articulation of something that had been left unwritten. Like a remarking of histories of persons conventionally unmarked by historiography, or a counterhistory invented in dialectic antitheses to the prevailing myths of that historiography, alternatives to "great works" of literary history offer an alternative to the cultural hegemonies that function through those works.

<sup>4</sup> Morrison's later work *Paradise* exhibits the interweaving of narratives that Rhodes identifies with the "disorienting, disjointed function[ing]" of memory. But in this case, two communities – one African American, and the other a community of women— are formed side by side and put into tension with each other. The work of communal memory, through storytelling or written record, comes to the foreground when there are not two individuals at stake but rather two communities with different utopian longings.

<sup>5</sup> The 2008 novel coincided with the election of the first African American president. The campaign occasioned no little reflection on different versions of America's past, but this was not always affirmative. When Michele Obama commented that she was proud of her country "for the first time," she was roundly criticized for feeling otherwise before.

<sup>6</sup> Normally, if they were recorded at all, it would only be in relations to the white husband/owner Jacob. Although "Sir" is a major presence in the book, Morrison places his death early in the text to emphasize that other character's existence exceeds his presence.

<sup>7</sup> One could even go so far as to say a particular configuration of "self" and "society" (or, identity and community) is used to distinguish American liberal democracy from its popular hobgoblins, fascism and communism. As the well-worn story goes, the liberal democrat is someone who champions the rights of the individual, which fascism or communism would subvert to national authority or social collectivity.

<sup>8</sup> Roth has often satirized the pastoral, nostalgic, idyllic, age-of-rest or rural simplicity that marks many version of the American dream. But *The Plot*, as a dystopic arcadia, does so in a different way. Insofar as

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it is pseudo-autobiographical, the novel seems to belong with the “Roth books.” But, because it also seems to pry into the ethos of a particular decade in “the American Century,” it is related to the American Trilogy.

<sup>9</sup> These sufferings are not interchangeable without serious damage to those involved: comparative ethnic studies always risk of erasing its subjects by homogenizing experiences. But at the same time, the demand to always and only attend to each experience in its uniqueness undermines any attempt to find common ground and can lead to an astructural particularism, which prevents critique of ideological systems of domination. I comment at length on this double bind in the afterword.

<sup>10</sup> This is something like Roth’s self-identified right to “be an American first and a Jew second.”

<sup>11</sup> To be exact, this is not the trauma-and-nostalgia scheme that Brauner analyzes, although trauma plays a role. By “adult” I do not mean to evoke the child/adult dynamics of psychoanalysis, but rather the development of a fully responsible human ethos, a more fully formed (but not necessarily complete or finished) stage of social development, marked by being able to have others depend upon oneself rather than only depending on others.

<sup>12</sup> While this care ethos could be seen as a reification of family, with the potential for replacing the Nation with the Family as the sublime communal being, Roth carefully delineates the each member of this community and the ways in which family does and does not mark their boundaries.

## PART 2 / NEGOTIABLE GEOGRAPHIES

<sup>1</sup> The general assumption we make, is that attending to the world is coextensive with attending to the world-as-it-is. This is especially characteristic of American discourses which conflate the practical, the pragmatic, and the objective. Of course, even such a discourse is not immune to the lures of utopian fantasy, as Rand’s objectivist philosophy and severe utopian vision amply demonstrate.

<sup>2</sup> Such observations are not unimportant, and the essays collected by Vinay Dharwadkar in *Cosmopolitan Geographies: New Locations in Literature and Culture* (2000) are particularly helpful in thinking through the geophysical expressions of what I would call postethnic culture.

<sup>3</sup> I am adopting Frye’s use of the word naïve to indicate a genre text that has no ironic distance from its own genre conceptions, e.g. no self-awareness, sophistication, maturity, etc.

<sup>4</sup> *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Clay* recounts the invention of quintessential “Escapist” American superhero fantasy in the 1930s. Late in the novel, Chabon counters the famous claim by Frederick Wertham that Batman and Robin presents a coded, pedophilic homosexual fantasy. Through the thoughts of “indifferent father” and comic-book creator Sammy, the novel contends that “...Wertham was an idiot; it was obvious that Batman was not intended, consciously or unconsciously, to play Robin’s corruptor: he was meant to stand for his father, and by extension the absent, indifferent, vanishing fathers of the comic-book-reading boys of America” (631). Thus escape is also a supplement, something that is needed or that we would wish for, perhaps counterfactually.

<sup>5</sup> Outside literature, in utopian politics, the failed experiment of Esperanto indicates the close relationship of glossopoeisis and intentional community.

<sup>6</sup> “I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with,” (2001, 446).

<sup>7</sup> Myers considers it a weakness in the novel that the final act of violence would have more meaning for real-world readers, familiar with real-world Middle-Eastern violence, than it would for the fictional characters imbedded in the ignorance of Chabon’s imaginary world without Israel: “the reader is expected to shudder in recognition: even if Jewish history had turned out differently, you see, the results would have

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been the same.” However, as I point out in the introduction, utopian fictions are by definition designed to make their meanings in comparison to the real world.

<sup>8</sup> Once sanctified, these thresholds allow individuals inside them to move about during the Sabbath without transgressing laws that limit certain activities to one’s own home.

<sup>9</sup> Not to mention Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” in which the transcendental self can see all because it is nothing.

<sup>10</sup> These are certainly the themes of much postmodernist fiction – again Auster’s *New York Trilogy* comes to mind, with its scenario of a young boy isolated in a locked room in a misguided attempt to develop a “perfect” (natural rather than nurtured) language in order to undo the curse of the Tower of Babel and usher in a new golden age. However, the “novel of ideas,” whether a utopianist exhortation like Bellamy’s or a metaphysical meditation like Auster’s, has left many readers cold. Very often, these readers are the same literary humanists who praise the warm bloodedness of naturalism, which is not exactly like the warmth of sentimentalism but is related to it. The reality of feelings and emotions, rather than ideas, we are told, equips naturalism for the cultivation of social empathy.

<sup>11</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin’s “medicine bag theory of fiction” is an instructive blending of Burke’s “literature as equipment for living” and traditional cultural roles of storytellers and bards.

<sup>12</sup> Silko is also known for her critique of “postmodern” apolitical narcissism in Louise Erdrich’s work. Erdrich, like Vizenor, is of Anishinaabe descent, and it is probably no coincidence that Anishinaabe traditions lend themselves to retelling in a narrative style that resembles postmodernism and verse style, that also resembles haiku. Nor is it likely an accident that Silko, who claims the Laguna pueblo tradition instead, at one time found that this style did not authentically or, at least, effectively perform the cultural-political work on behalf of native sovereignty proper to Native American literature. The differences in Anishinaabe and pueblo traditions, and the literary sensibilities informed by them, goes to the point made in *Bearheart*, that “there are too many exceptions” to use a homogenizing term such as Indian.

<sup>13</sup> The title of *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* contains an intercultural neologism: “bugi” is used to indicate both American disco boogie and an invented traditional Japanese dance.

### PART 3 / EMPTY FUTURES

<sup>1</sup> Futurism means other things in other contexts, of course. For example, the Russian Futurists comprised a set of attitudes and expectations about the future of revolutionary Soviet society. Italian Futurism is more like the Russian version than the American, but configured differently in a non-soviet culture. American futurists, as good capitalists rather than good political revolutionaries, tend only to anticipate the next patent or invention. On this point, we should note, that American progressive discourse has been known to mythologize scientific innovation and capitalist entrepreneurship, represented in the American science-hero typified in the figure of Thomas Edison.

<sup>2</sup> Conventionally, science fiction can also name an adventure story that contains fantastic technologies, like robots and spaceships, without necessarily meditating on what these technologies say to the human condition. These are not science fiction in the terms I apply here, although they bear a strong “familial relation” to it. Scientific or otherwise, adventure has much in common with utopia. There are notable geographical utopian adventure stories, mostly related to the discourses of the British Empire, such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *King Solomon’s Mines*, *Lost Horizon*. There are also dystopian adventure stories that mark the ending of the empire, *The Man Who Would Be King*, *Handful of Dust*, and *Heart of Darkness*, to name a few. The alliance of utopian imagination and imperial adventure can be reasonably attributed to the



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writing of More's *Utopia* in 1516. It is not coincidence that the modern utopia is written in the Age of Exploration, only a quarter century after Columbus's "discovery" of the new world.

<sup>3</sup> Given their view of a great work as temporally transcendent, those who commit themselves to such a project of ten tend to articulate this commitment as a *moral* rather than *practical* imperative. There is a question of whether one can have morals if one does not believe in a truth by which behavior can be measured at any time in any place. It may be that if one gives up the notion of a true destiny, one is bereft of morals and must rely on pragmatic ethics instead.

<sup>4</sup> Two examples of which will illustrate the rhetorical characteristics of the prophetic voice. First, when Nathan rebukes Daniel for sins of adultery and murder, he does so by telling him a story about a rich man who wrongs a poor man by taking the one lamb he cherishes. David, thinking that he is presiding over a legal proceeding in his role as king, condemns the rich man vehemently. Nathan turns on David, pronouncing "You are the man!," and the king is deeply convinced of his own injustices – his attention has been redirected through the indirect method of imaginative storytelling. (While Nathan, a storyteller, can be thought of as a writer of fictions, other prophets, such as Isaiah, wrote poetry.) Another tactic, which will be key to understanding Vonnegut's prophetic voice, is the shock tactic of a sufficiently strange and interesting stunt. Perhaps the best known example from the Jewish prophets is Hosea's marriage to the prostitute Gomer, which was meant to symbolize God's covenant with an unfaithful Israel.<sup>4</sup> But the satiric stunt is better known from a different tradition of truth-tellers, the Cynics. Whereas the prophets were sometimes clothed in rags and fed on locusts in the wilderness, the cynics would sometimes go about naked to show their disregard for social convention (noumen) vis-à-vis natural states of being (phýsis). The best known cynical prank is attributed to Diogenes of Sinope, who according to tradition lived in a barrel rather than a house and wandered around Athens with a lantern. If anyone asked him what he was looking for, he would reply that he was trying to find an honest man. This kind of practical joke, and the ability of absurdity to license challenging speech, is part of a long tradition of satire and jesting. The ability of non-serious behavior to make an opening for serious communication is related to the literary tactic above. Just as a joking cynic is able to say outrageous things because she is just kidding, the storyteller and poet can speak difficult truths under the excuse of making-up stories or putting together pretty words for the inconsequential purposes of mere entertainment. In both these tactics, the prophetic voice relies on an indirect method to side-step a listener's reticence to have a given issue addressed directly.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that, like Butler, Vonnegut has used a religion invented by one of his characters to comment on the human condition. But in Vonnegut's case, in *Cat's Cradle*, the religion of Bokonanism is based on telling better and better lies to comfort believers who must live in an uncaring cosmos. At the end of the novel, the world freezes solid because someone accidentally drops a science experiment.

<sup>6</sup> Oliver Ferguson notes the showmanship of this narrative technique: "Vonnegut has provided two equally plausible solutions to the problem of how to contrive a credible plot that must span a million years: the unambiguously supernatural one of Leon as ghost, and the less fanciful but no less ingenious one of him as madman" (1999, 234). I am not sure that this distinction makes a difference.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, this question might only be important to ethno-cultural traditions who have assumed a particular kind of importance of God and destiny in the first place. It is precisely such a culture – Western culture in general and American culture in particular—in which Butler and Vonnegut intervene. As utopian narrative in American literature goes postethnic, we should not be surprised that other points of view enter into the picture, with the consequence that not only the possible answers but also what counts as the questions at hand undergo revision.

<sup>8</sup> We should note it also removes the desire for nonliterary manifestos like Manifest Destiny, or "spreading democracy"

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<sup>9</sup> Specifically, insofar as well-being depends on a healthy environment, a commitment to ecological preservation is in order. “Might we not go farther,” Vonnegut proposes, “and say that anything which wounds the planet is evil, and anything which preserves it or heals it is good?” (1981, 185).

<sup>10</sup> And, moreover, because people are only “coincidental” to the universe, this presumption of dignity does not have to be, and maybe even should not be limited to human beings: “If you see dignity in anything, in fact—it doesn’t have to be human—you will still want to understand it and help it. Many people are now seeing dignity in the lower animals and the plant world and waterfalls and deserts—and even in the entire planet and its atmosphere. And now they are helpless not to want to understand and to help those things.” (1981, 195)

<sup>11</sup> For an instructive account of the limits of trickster jesting and the risk of “irony fatigue,” see Will Kaufman *The Comedian as Confidence Man: Studies in Irony Fatigue* (1997). Kaufman includes a chapter on Vonnegut.

<sup>12</sup> The importance of these dual lives, one as a career scientist and one as a domestic caregiver, speak in obvious ways to the concerns of feminist writers. See especially Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” on the patriarchal ideologies of domesticity and intellectual or creative work. “The discontinuity of female life, with its attention to small chores, errands, work that others constantly undo, small children’s needs” (1993, 173) is the source, in Rich’s essay, of both a fragmented aesthetic (in her poetry) and something like a crisis in her identity (as a wife and mother, as a poet), leading to a politicization of both.

## AFTERWORD / ON UTOPIA, ECOLOGY, AND HOUSEKEEPING

<sup>1</sup>Rorty points toward the postethnic shift when he writes, “We have come to see that the only lesson of either history or anthropology is our extraordinary malleability. We are coming to think of ourselves as the flexible, protean, self-shaping animal rather than as the rational animal or the cruel animal” (1999, 69).

<sup>2</sup> Note that interactions are not limited to the anthropocentric: Yarbrough writes that “most strangely... we are necessarily in ethnical relationships with all creatures and things, not just other human beings” (2006, xiii).

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